

1984

## Burton-Swartz Cypress Company of Florida

Drew Harrington



Part of the [American Studies Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

Find similar works at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/fhq>

University of Central Florida Libraries <http://library.ucf.edu>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by STARS. It has been accepted for inclusion in Florida Historical Quarterly by an authorized editor of STARS. For more information, please contact [STARS@ucf.edu](mailto:STARS@ucf.edu).

---

### Recommended Citation

Harrington, Drew (1984) "Burton-Swartz Cypress Company of Florida," *Florida Historical Quarterly*: Vol. 63 : No. 4 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/fhq/vol63/iss4/5>

## BURTON-SWARTZ CYPRESS COMPANY OF FLORIDA

by DREW HARRINGTON

LOGGING operations began in Taylor County in 1913 when three men— S. J. Carpenter, W. L. Burton, and E. G. Swartz— formed the Burton-Swartz Cypress Company of Florida. Carpenter, president of Carpenter-O'Brien Lumber Company, a large Jacksonville operation, owned thousands of acres in Dixie, Taylor, and Lafayette counties.<sup>1</sup> He planned a southwestward expansion, but his interest was in the pine timber of the area. Because saws which cut pine cannot be used to harvest cypress, Carpenter needed someone to “checkerboard” with him by cutting the virgin cypress on his holdings. Perhaps it was at the Yellow Pine Manufacturers Association's Convention in February 1913, that he learned of the land deal between W. L. Burton and E. G. Swartz of the Burton-Swartz Cypress Company of Burton, Louisiana, and the J. C. Turner Lumber Company of New York City, whereby Burton and Swartz had acquired an interest in the 94,000 acres of land that the northern company owned in Lee County, Florida.<sup>2</sup> Captain Burton, as he was known, had acquired large holdings in Lee, Collier, and Hendry counties— amounting at one time to 600,000 acres— at \$1.00 per acre.<sup>3</sup> About 150,000 acres were located in the Florida Everglades.<sup>4</sup> It was Carpenter

---

Drew Harrington is professor of history, Western Kentucky University.

1. Louise Childers, “Carbur— A Look Back,” *Buckeye Fiberscope*, V (March 1975), n. p.
2. “Big Cypress Lumber Purchase,” *American Lumberman* (March 1, 1913), 31. Author's copy was in a letter from Clark Forrest, Jr., who copied the information, December 9, 1982. The land was later sold to the Lee Cypress Company, which Burton, Swartz, and Turner had incorporated in 1923, and which became a wholly-owned subsidiary of J. C. Turner Lumber Company. See “Speech” by Lewis Hinchliffe, September 8, 1964, 3-4. The speech— mainly a short history of the Lee Tidewater Cypress Company— was presented to the Perry Rotary Club on September 8, 1964, and to the Perry Kiwanis Club on September 16, 1964. A copy of the speech is in the author's possession.
3. Drew Harrington, “William L. Burton: Cypress Millionaire and Philanthropist,” *Louisiana History*, XXIV (Spring 1983), 160.
4. Hinchliffe, “Speech,” 3-4.

who first contacted Burton and Swartz about joint operations in Taylor County.

On November 11, 1913, Burton, Swartz, and Carpenter petitioned for the incorporation of the Burton-Swartz Cypress Company of Florida. Perhaps because Burton and Swartz had operated a successful company in Louisiana, and because Carpenter primarily sawed pine, the Burton-Swartz name prevailed. The move to Florida represented a major shift of operations for Burton and Swartz. The Burton-Swartz Cypress Company of Burton, Louisiana, during the years 1905-1918, had exhausted the cypress of the region, and had ceased operation in 1919.<sup>5</sup> These circumstances led to the transfer of operations to Florida.

On December 12, 1913, the Florida incorporation charter was granted, "for the purpose of owning, leasing, operating, and managing mills and plants for the production of lumber and its by-products." The company would have the right to establish roads, railroads, stores, ice plants, electric plants, and a hotel. The charter called for capital stock of \$1,200,000, divided into 1,200 shares at \$100 per share, with ten per cent to be paid in cash. Burton with 550 shares, Swartz with 550 shares, and Carpenter with 100 shares constituted the original shareholders. Burton, as president, Swartz, as vice-president and treasurer, and M. L. Rhodes, as secretary, filled the corporate offices. These three, together with Carpenter and William O'Brien, formed the board of directors. Company headquarters were in Jacksonville and the main mill was at Perry.<sup>6</sup>

Although day-to-day operations were Swartz's responsibility, Captain Burton was determined to make the mill the most efficient of the day. He equipped it with the best modern equipment, and it became the largest cypress mill in the country.<sup>7</sup> The construction of the mill began in early 1913, and by the fall of the following year, either October or November, the sawing of lumber commenced.<sup>8</sup> Shipment of cypress from the yard did not

5. Harrington, "W. L. Burton," 160-61.

6. Minutes of Burton-Swartz Cypress Company of Florida, December 13, 1915 (hereinafter referred to as Minutes, with the date of entry). These minutes are found in the Taylor County Historical Society building, Perry, Florida.

7. Harrington, "W. L. Burton," 160-61.

8. Georgia G. Lowe to author, July 23, 1979. Mrs. Lowe worked for the company and its successor in a variety of positions, from secretary to bookkeeper, from April 1919 until August 1978.

start until 1915, because "a slow drying process was required of proper seasoning and to get the advantage [of] the finest quality possible. Even though the trees have been girdled they were still not sufficiently dry . . . a careful estimate indicates 309 gallons of water to be contained in a thousand feet of green cypress, too speedy a removal of this moisture would have seriously ruined valuable cypress. A rule of thumb proved fairly accurate that the sawn lumber required a drying time of about a year to the inch, depending upon atmospheric conditions."<sup>9</sup>

In January 1915, the company shipped its first six cars of cypress; by December it had shipped 573 cars. During that year 38,038,708 feet of cypress were cut, of which 11,896,016 were shipped.<sup>10</sup> The company continued to grow, and stockholders frequently received dividends of twenty to thirty per cent. Due to the growth and, perhaps foreseeing the closure of its Louisiana operation, the stockholders voted on March 15, 1916, to move the corporate headquarters to Perry. The first meeting was held there on February 25, 1917.<sup>11</sup> Since Swartz had managed the operations of both mills, the closing of the Louisiana operation made it possible for him to focus on the Perry mill as well as the community of Perry.

The arrival of Burton-Swartz Cypress Company changed Perry, Florida, in many ways. The site of the mill had been the property of Judge Robert Henderson who died in 1911.<sup>12</sup> It is likely that his heirs sold the land to S. J. Carpenter. Although the company did not take over the entire town of Perry as did some cotton mill owners elsewhere in the South, it did develop an area which contained the houses of its employees. It came to be known as Burton-Swartz quarters.<sup>13</sup> Employees with names like Hecker, Brescher, Cross, Hawkins, Chiasson, Louque, Land, Begue, Savoie, Herbert, Poitivent, Borklund, McPhail, Schexnauldre, Heins, and Rose moved in from the Louisiana

9. Hinchliffe, "Speech," 8.

10. Report of "Cars of Lumber Shipped and Comparisons of Cut and shipments." This report shows that between 1915 and 1942, when it sold out to Lee Cypress Company, Burton-Swartz produced 778,183,558 feet cut and shipped 782,432,290 feet in 39,590 cars. Copy of report in author's possession.

11. Minutes, March 15, 1916; February 25, 1917; April 3, 1925; and February 17, 1926.

12. "Judge Robert Henderson, 1823-1911," *They Were Here*, Taylor County Historical Society, II (November 1973), n.p.

13. *Perry News-Herald*, November 28, 1968.

operation to work for the company and to live in the houses. The company also built a hotel where Captain Burton spent several months each winter before going to New Orleans. When Burton was expected, the mill had a "clean-up" program because he "checked into even the smallest items"<sup>14</sup>

To assist its employees, the company announced the opening of a mercantile store in the quarters, but local citizens persuaded the management to build in town. The Burton-Swartz Mercantile Company, described as a "complete Department Store," was primarily a company store, but it served the general public. The company paid with checks, but advances could be obtained in script— aluminum and paper— which had to be spent at the company store.<sup>15</sup> A doctor was also provided for the workers. He received a monthly salary, a portion of which had been deducted from every employee's paycheck whether he utilized the services or not. The company allowed the doctor to have an outside practice, but operating too independently occasionally caused problems. Once a manager fired a doctor because he attended the mother of an attorney whom the manager disliked.<sup>16</sup> Dr. John Clement Ellis practiced medicine as the company doctor at both Carbur and Perry.<sup>17</sup> The company also deeded land to build churches for its employees, most of whom were either Episcopal or Catholic.<sup>18</sup>

While there was an influx of families from Louisiana, the company also hired local people, such as James R. "Dick" Jones, Walter Clifford Burford, Joseph Edgar Courtney, James Carol Dandridge, Eugene Hendry, and Dr. John Ellis. These men held responsible positions ranging from "supervisor of Cypress girdling" to crane operator.<sup>19</sup> The families from Louisiana integrated easily in the community, and soon there were marriages between members of Perry families and the newcomers.

Because S. J. Carpenter needed someone to saw the cypress timber on his Dixie, Lafayette, and Taylor counties properties, he had formed the partnership with Burton-Swartz Cypress Com-

14. Lowe to author, July 23, 1979.

15. Interview with Georgia Lowe, July 23, 1979; Perry *News-Herald*, November 28, 1968.

16. *Ibid.*

17. "Dr. John Clement Ellis, 1882-1944," *They Were Here*, II (November 1973), n.p.

18. Minutes, February 24, 1917, and February 8, 1921.

19. *They Were Here*, VI (June 30, 1977), 8, 14, 17, and 19.

pany. At their January 23, 1914, meeting the stockholders voted to allow Burton "to make and to execute with Carpenter-O'Brien Company a contract to purchase the cypress timber of that company." Cash and shares of Burton-Swartz Cypress Company covered the cost of the timber.<sup>20</sup>

Having built the saw mill at Perry, Burton, Swartz, and Carpenter followed the practice of many lumber operations of that period, by doing the actual logging away from the mill. Hence, they established a logging town, seventeen miles south of Perry, to be the center of their logging operation. They named it Carbur from a combination of their names. Swartz laid out the town on a 640-acre tract. He also planned the dual operation of cutting the cypress and pine, which were shipped to Perry. The cypress was milled there, and the pine was shipped to Jacksonville for milling. The town contained the Carbur Mercantile Company, a general merchandise store which supplied the entire community, a barber shop, school, dry cleaners, depot, doctor's office for periodic visits by the company physician from Perry, and a hotel. There was also a rooming house for bachelors, humorously known as the "Bull Pen." Prices at the company store were similar to prices at other southern locations at that time.<sup>21</sup>

Because of the relative brief life of a lumbering community and the transient nature of many employees, Carbur existed only a short time; permanence did not figure into the development of the community. The houses, constructed of heart pine or cypress, contained few conveniences. A few had electricity for lights, but most used kerosene lanterns, and none had telephones or indoor toilets; outdoor pits and, later, privies served as sanitary facilities. The houses were screened to alleviate the mosquito problem. This and the drainage of the area were the suggestions of Dr. Walter Baker, apparently a company doctor.

Life in Carbur was austere, but not impossible. Two churches – a Methodist and a Holiness – met the spiritual needs of the inhabitants as well as providing a social outlet through the missionary circles and societies. Further social opportunity came when

---

20. Minutes, January 23, 1914. The contract was executed on January 24, 1914.

21. Abraham Bergland, et al., *Labor in the Industrial South* (Charlottesville, 1930), 142-43.

Prissy Goodrich, wife of Henry, a land surveyor, started a bridge club. The young people participated in a number of activities, such as Saturday night movies, football, basketball, fishing, outings in the woods, and trips to nearby Keaton Beach. The men entertained themselves by playing baseball— for which they organized a team to play teams from other communities— fishing, hunting, dancing, and Sunday horseback riding, which some passed off as merely exercising the horses.

Some men preferred the socially unacceptable activities of drinking and gambling. When a person drank too much or engaged in a fight or squabble, usually associated with a poker game, Captain Henry Slaughter, who served as sheriff, would handcuff the offender to a porch rail until morning, since there was no jail in Carbur. That individual would then appear before the justice of peace, who meted out the appropriate fine or in the case of a repeat offender would order the culprit to Perry where he was jailed. Sometimes Captain Slaughter had even more serious problems. If the altercation ended in a homicide, he would summon the Perry funeral director to come for the body. Infrequently, the dead man proved to be a transient worker who was unknown to the community, in which case the body was buried on “Boot Hill” in Carbur. Racial problems did not seem to enter into the trouble which occasionally erupted in the community.

Perhaps, being awakened by the 4:30 a.m. mill whistles or by one of Captain Slaughter’s men took most of the fight out of these hardworking loggers. The day began early and the work was hard. Logging in the early twentieth century depended to a great extent on pre-industrial revolution methods of labor with human beings and beasts of burden providing most of the power. Harvesting the cypress timber meant penetrating a wilderness consisting of sloughs, ponds, wild animals, snakes, alligators, and thick undergrowth. The task proved so difficult that the first step was to send in crews of contractors to clear the ground for the other crews. These men used oxen to open a path because these animals, due to their hooves, could walk in the swampy muck. Either travelling with the contractors or coming shortly thereafter, a surveyor sectioned off the area and planned the logging operation, which meant cutting pine and cypress timber from each section. One such surveyor at Carbur, Mark Hitchcock, who prepared the topographical map for the company, proved so

adept at this task that he could determine the board feet in a standing tree. The logging crew, men using six-to nine-foot cross-cut saws, came next. In cypress logging the crew entered the section to be cut and girdled the trees, which meant notching the base of the tree so the sap would run down and the tree would die. After girdling the trees in a given section, they moved to another section to repeat the process. After sufficient time (the longer the trees stood the better the quality of the timber), they returned to fell the girdled trees. These men stood in water, sometimes waist-deep, and sawed the cypress with their big cross-cut saws. Once the trees fell, they had to be trimmed so that they could be moved to the logging cars; brush or small trees between the fallen logs and the logging cars were also cleared.

The logging cars ran on rails, and trams or rail lines were laid to the areas where the loggers were felling the cypress. The right of way was prepared, low areas filled in, the cross-ties and rails were laid, and dirt was emptied on each side to build up the bed. Afterwards came the locomotives and logging cars. Sometimes spur lines ran about a quarter of a mile from the mainline. At the Carbur operation, as at other sites, power skidders pulled the logs to the cars. A power skidder "consisted of a stationary steam engine and a large rotating drum. One end of a flexible cable or wire rope was wound around the drum and the other fastened to a log. As the drum rotated it drew in the wire rope and pulled the log to the skidder."<sup>22</sup> Horses pulled the cable or wire rope from the skidder to the fallen timber, men attached the cables, and the skidder started. Large crews worked the skidders. Since horses were a major part of this operation, there was a full-time veterinarian, Dr. J. L. Stephens, at Carbur. There was also a blacksmith and men who helped in the stable and cared for the animals.

The Burton-Swartz Cypress Company was one of the few in the area to utilize power skidders in their operation. "The units were expensive, cumbersome, and dangerous. The least irregularities in the ground placed undue wear on the cables and soon caused them to break. This was extremely dangerous because when a cable under tension broke, it whipped back like a coil

---

22. Richard Walter Massey, *A History of the Lumber Industry in Alabama and West Florida, 1880-1914* (Ph.D. diss., Vanderbilt University, 1960), 68-69.



spring and could easily kill or maim anyone who happened to be in the way. Also ground skidding was most destructive; the logs being pulled along the ground destroyed all the young trees in the area, and to some extent, even the logs themselves were damaged.<sup>23</sup> At Carbur, a machine shop foundry, employing ninety men, kept the equipment functioning, by repairing and building whatever equipment the loggers needed. Claiming that they could build any piece of logging equipment, the men of the machine shop foundry laughed at vice-president Swartz for buying a huge skidder, nicknamed the "Titanic," which proved too heavy for the rails at Carbur and could not be operated economically. It was one of the few blunders made by Swartz, and it remains rusting in the area today.<sup>24</sup>

Since the distance into the swamp determined the length of the work day, it began early. Arising at 4:30 a.m., probably eating a breakfast of fried fat pork, biscuits, syrup, and coffee, and catching a train to the work area at 6:00 a.m., the logger's day usually lasted from ten to twelve hours. The workers were paid according to their job. The laborers received twenty-five cents per hour, which meant they could earn between \$30.00 and \$65.00 per week. The laborers collected their pay each night. The company allowed some men to get advance pay in the form of script or brass coins which were usually spent at the company store. Since company housing and other benefits were relatively cheap, the pay was good for the times.<sup>25</sup>

As the cypress disappeared to the saws, Carbur fell on difficult times. Several factors suggest the identification of Carbur as lumber mill "C" in *Labor in the Industrial South*. Information gathered in 1928 caused the author of that section of the book to state: "C is an isolated mill in Florida. It is not on any main highway and is about seventeen miles from a town of considerable size. However, seventeen miles in Florida is a short distance, and the workers depend entirely upon the neighboring towns for their entertainment. The village is in a rather run-down condition due, according to the superintendent, to the poor business

---

23. Ibid.

24. Jane Whitney to author, July 14, 1984.

25. Childers, "Carbur— A Look Back." Most of the material about Carbur and logging came from this work.

which pervades the lumber industry. There are two streets in the village separated by a vacant space. One section is for the colored people, and the other for the white. Neither of the streets is paved, but both have board walks now very badly in need of repair, but which in the past have been kept up. The houses have all been painted at some time, but now need paint badly, and the fences are rather dilapidated. However, every white man's house has sewer connections, which is rather unusual for a small temporary village so many miles away from any city. The school is a small one; the commissary handles little but necessities; and there are no opportunities offered for any sort of entertainment. Two clubhouses are provided for the Negroes— one for the pious folks whose chief amusement is lodge and revival meetings, and another at the other side of the quarters for those Negroes who wish to dance, shoot craps, and carry on in a lighter vein than that offered by the brethren of the cloth.<sup>26</sup>

The first fact that suggests the identification as Carbur is the seventeen-mile distance from the nearest town— Perry lay just seventeen miles north of Carbur. The comment of two clubhouses coincides with Louise Childers's description which stated that there were two communities of blacks— one containing a "juke joint" and the other a church which was shared by the Methodists and the Baptists.<sup>27</sup> Alton Wentworth, a former principal at Carbur, described the small school to this writer as he showed him a picture of the boys' basketball team.<sup>28</sup> Further, the reason for the "run-down condition of the village" as being "due to the poor business which pervades the lumber industry" is substantiated by the records of the Burton-Swartz Cypress Company which show a disparity of 2,846,208 board feet over-shipped in 1927 and 17,731,411 board feet over-shipped the following year. The company was suffering hard times; only in the Depression era of the 1930s did the record look worse.<sup>29</sup> Time began taking its toll of Carbur, and though it continued on for some years, it never returned to its heyday.<sup>30</sup>

---

26. Bergland, *Labor in the Industrial South*, 57.

27. Childers, "Carbur— A Look Back."

28. Alton Wentworth to author, July 23, 1979.

29. Report of "Cars of Lumber Shipped and Comparison of Cut and Shipments."

30. Bergland, *Labor in the Industrial South*, 142-43.

Because of the successful logging operations at Carbur and other camps in Taylor and neighboring counties, Burton-Swartz Cypress Company continued to grow. Its charter had called for the shareholders to issue 1,200 shares of stock, to limit indebtedness to \$2,000,000, and to limit the combined salaries of the officers to \$12,000 annually. At their April 15, 1914, meeting, the stockholders heard S. J. Carpenter announce that he had assigned forty-seven shares each to W. L. Burton and E. G. Swartz as well as two shares each to M. L. Rhodes and William O'Brien, which accounted for his 100 shares.<sup>31</sup> At that same meeting, where they approved the constitution and by-laws, Burton asked that he and Swartz be paid in stock shares at par value for the money they had loaned for building the mill at Perry, as well as providing the Carpenter-O'Brien Company with two-thirds the number of shares which Burton and Swartz received. This would be in accordance with the contract of January 24, 1914, which provided for the acquisition of the cypress in the immediate area. By March 15, 1916, the company had grown and the stock distribution included W. L. Burton, 3,597 shares; E. G. Swartz, 3,597 shares; W. B. Davis, two shares; S. J. Carpenter, two shares; William O'Brien, two shares; and Carpenter-O'Brien Company, 4,796 shares.<sup>32</sup> In 1917, Carpenter-O'Brien Company sold its stock and assets to Brooks-Scanlon Company.<sup>33</sup> The acquisition by Brooks-Scanlon did not harm the operations of the Burton-Swartz Cypress Company. In a letter of September 11, 1918, to W. B. Davis, company secretary, Captain Burton issued a call for a special stockholders meeting on October 14, 1918, for the purpose of considering increasing the capital stock from \$1,200,000 to \$2,200,000 and to consider any other business. A quorum could not be gathered until October 30, 1918, when the stockholders voted the change. The change lifted the shares from 12,000 at \$100 per share to 22,000 at \$100 each. At that same meeting, they purchased cypress timber in sections of Lafayette and Taylor counties from the Putnam Lumber Company for \$163,485; \$50,000 to be paid in cash and the remainder in United States Liberty bonds. They also purchased other cypress in Taylor and Jefferson counties

---

31. Minutes, April 15, 1914.

32. *Ibid.*, March 15, 1916.

33. Childers, "Carbur— A Look Back."

from O'Brien-Irwin Company.<sup>34</sup> Dividends which had reached a high of thirty per cent in 1926, dipped to ten per cent in 1927.<sup>35</sup> The dividends probably dropped further since the company cut only 9,131,844 feet in 1928, even though they shipped 26,863,255 feet.<sup>36</sup> One reason for the short cutting was the extremely cold weather that killed many trees that year.<sup>37</sup>

By 1918, Captain Burton had become interested in other ventures. He had incorporated the Little Bay Improvement Corporation in New York City and built a \$200,000 mansion on property he had purchased on the north shore of Long Island. He wanted to establish a memorial for William Waldo Burton, his only child, who had died in 1914. In 1922, he built the William Waldo Burton Memorial Home for Boys on Carrollton Avenue in New Orleans.<sup>38</sup> Burton incorporated Burton Securities Corporation and transferred to it 11,000 shares of Burton-Swartz Cypress Company stock. Although he was ill, he attended a director's meeting on February 8, 1927. He died on May 8, 1927.<sup>39</sup>

The company continued with Swartz, assisted by A. W. Rose, Burton's brother-in-law, until it sawed all of the cypress in the area. That fact and an offer from Lee Cypress Company caused Burton-Swartz Cypress Company of Florida to liquidate on December 31, 1942.<sup>40</sup> The closure of the mill devastated the economy of Perry, but the Lee Cypress Company, which later became Lee Tidewater Cypress, resumed milling again in 1943 when it devised a way to ship cypress cut in the Everglades to Perry for sawing.<sup>41</sup> The pattern developed at Carbur became magnified in the Everglades, so in a sense Burton-Swartz Cypress Company lived on.

---

34. Minutes, October 30, 1918.

35. *Ibid.*, February 17, 1926, and February 8, 1927.

36. Report of "Cars and Lumber Shipped and Comparison of Cut and shipments."

37. Childers, "Carbur— A Look Back."

38. Harrington, "W. L. Burton," 161-63.

39. Minutes, February 8, 1927; Harrington, "W. L. Burton," 164.

40. Lowe to author, July 23, 1979.

41. Hinchliffe, "Speech," 5.