

1990

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### Recommended Citation

Noll, Steven (1990) "Care and Control of the Feeble-minded: Florida Farm Colony, 1920-1945," *Florida Historical Quarterly*. Vol. 69 : No. 1 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/fhq/vol69/iss1/5>

## **CARE AND CONTROL OF THE FEEBLE-MINDED: FLORIDA FARM COLONY, 1920-1945**

by STEVEN NOLL

**H**ASTINGS HART, director of the Child Helping Department of the Russell Sage Foundation, reported in January 1918 that Florida's "most acute and pressing social problem at the present time is the problem of the feeble-minded." Hart, who prepared a social welfare plan for Florida at the request of Governor Sidney J. Catts, recommended that "Florida ought to make immediate institutional provision for at least 500 of this class [the feeble-minded], following the good examples which have been recently set by the states of Virginia and North Carolina."<sup>1</sup> A year later, on April 17, 1919, the state legislature followed this request by authorizing "the Organization and Management of a State Institution for Epileptic and Feeble-minded."<sup>2</sup> Opened in Gainesville in November 1921, the Florida Farm Colony for Epileptic and Feeble-minded Persons operated as Florida's only public facility for individuals with

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Steven Noll is a doctoral candidate, University of Florida. The author would like to express his appreciation to Max Jackson and Agnes Stanford of Gainesville Sunland Center and to the Rockefeller Archive Center and the University of Florida Department of History for their financial assistance.

1. Hastings Hart, with the assistance of Clarence Stonaker, "A Social Welfare Plan for the State of Florida— Prepared at the Request of His Excellency Sidney J. Catts, Governor, and the Cabinet of State Officers" in David Hammack, ed., *The Russell Sage Foundation* (Frederick, MD, 1988), microfiche 102 CH 35, 30-31. See also telegrams from Catts to Hart, September 18 and December 18, 1917, regarding the feasibility of a state survey in record group IV4B1, Early Office Files, box 14, folder 122, Russell Sage Foundation Archives, Rockefeller Archive Center, Pocantico Hills, New York. See also "Florida Surveyed for War and Peace;" *The Survey* 39 (March 2, 1918), 598.
2. *Laws of Florida* (1919), 2 vols., I, 231. The bill was adopted after Dr. Alexander Johnson, director of the National Committee on Provision for the Feeble-Minded, addressed the legislature on the problems of the feeble-minded. *Florida House Journal* (1919), 2 vols., I, 166.

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mental retardation until the 1960s. Conceived as an integral part of Governor Catt's social welfare program, the Farm Colony soon lost its progressive mission, and by 1945, it had become little more than a custodial warehouse for "a great many hopeless and crippled children."<sup>3</sup>

The decade of the 1910s witnessed the growth of the pervasive idea that feeble-minded individuals presented a grave menace to the American population.<sup>4</sup> Fueled by scientific discoveries in genetic and hereditary research, educators and social workers endeavored to alert Americans to the increase in crime and immorality caused by feeble-minded individuals. "We now know that Feeble-Mindedness enters into and complicates every one of our great social problems," wrote Joseph Byers of the National Committee on Provision for the Feeble-Minded in 1916. "We are beginning to know that the first stage in their solution must be the identification and elimination of this feeble-minded element." Byers urged that feeble-minded individuals be placed in "permanent segregation in suitable institutions under state control."<sup>5</sup>

Governor Catts, though often described as a political demagogue, left an improved social welfare system as his legacy to the state of Florida.<sup>6</sup> In addition to the beginnings of the Florida

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3. J. Maxey Dell to Dr. James Anderson, March 20, 1940, Superintendents' Correspondence, vault files, Gainesville Sunland Center (hereafter, G.S.C.). Gainesville Sunland Center is the current name for the institution previously known as Florida Farm Colony. The facility presently houses approximately 700 individuals with mental handicaps.
  4. Educators, psychologists, and social workers used the term "feeble-minded" to identify persons who presently would be labeled as "mentally handicapped" or "mentally retarded." The term "feeble-minded" will be used throughout the body of this article. The feeble-minded were divided into three broad categories: morons—high-functioning individuals with IQs from fifty-five to seventy-five who usually could attend school and with training could hold unskilled jobs; imbeciles—mid-range individuals with IQs from twenty-five to fifty-five who with training could become partially self-sufficient and perform repetitive workshop tasks; and idiots—low-functioning persons with IQs below twenty-five. Many idiots suffered from concomitant physical disabilities such as cerebral palsy and epilepsy, had difficulty communicating, and were often incontinent.
  5. Joseph Byers, "Public Address to the 1916 National Conference of Charities and Corrections," in *Proceedings of the National Conference of Charities and Corrections. 1916* (Chicago, 1916), 224-26.
  6. Wayne Flynt, *Cracker Messiah: Governor Sidney J. Catts of Florida* (Baton Rouge, 1977), 212-13.

Farm Colony, his administration initiated a reorganization of the state prison system, instituted reforms at the Industrial School for boys in Marianna, established the Industrial School for girls in Ocala, and increased expenditures at the Florida School for the Deaf and Blind in St. Augustine. His actions were part of a pattern of social reform and progress throughout the South during the early years of the twentieth century. Southern reformers recoiled at "the spectacle of millions of uneducated white and black children, at the exploitation of women and children in the South's new industries, [and] at the primitive character of the section's public institutions of the deprived and defective."<sup>7</sup> Prodded by northern philanthropic foundations and local social welfare advocates, every southern state opened a public institution for the feeble-minded in the ten-year period from 1914 to 1923.<sup>8</sup>

Florida's small but influential urban constituency pushed in the early years of the twentieth century for the opening of an institution to house feeble-minded persons. The Children's Home Society, headquartered in Jacksonville, led this crusade. Mainly an adoption agency, this organization also pressed for reforms in child labor laws and juvenile justice. Marcus C. Fagg, its executive secretary and director, reported to the 1912 convention of the National Conference of Charities and Corrections (NCCC) that "the Children's Home Society of Florida is not only a State Children's Bureau . . . but it is a Statewide educational and social force. . . . Candidates for Governor and Legislators are publicly announcing their attitudes favoring social reforms, new institutions, abolishment of the convict-lease law, and child-labor law."<sup>9</sup> Another Florida member of the NCCC, the Jackson-

7. Dewey Grantham, *Southern Progressivism: The Reconciliation of Progress and Tradition* (Knoxville, 1983), 178. For a detailed account of this southern concern for social justice, see *ibid.*, 178-245.

8. See Edward Devine, "The Feeble-Minded in Georgia," *The Survey* 43 (January 24, 1920), 467; and Thomas Haines, "Abstract of the Mississippi Mental Deficiency Survey," *Mental Hygiene* 4 (1920), 682-94 for examples of the relationship of northern philanthropies and southern institution building.

9. Marcus C. Fagg, "Report to the National Conference of Charities and Corrections," *Proceedings of the National Conference of Charities and Corrections*, 1912 (Chicago, 1912), 503. See also *13th Annual Report of the Children's Home Society 1915* (n.p., 1915), 6; *19th Annual Report of the Children's Home Society 1921* (n.p., 1921), 22; and *A Brief Summary Concerning the Children's Home Society of Florida, September 15, 1935* (pamphlet, n.p., 1935), 2. P. K. Yonge Library of Florida History, University of Florida, Gainesville.

ville Woman's Club, earned "chief credit" for Florida's progressive legislation, including provisions for a "school and institution for feeble-minded individuals."<sup>10</sup>

This reform-minded constituency, centered mainly in the city of Jacksonville, pressed the Florida legislature to investigate the state's provisions for the feeble-minded. In response, the legislature in 1915 appointed a commission to investigate "the need of a State institution for the care of the indigent, epileptic, and feeble-minded in the State of Florida." Composed of "five members, at least one of whom is to be a licensed Physician," the commission was allotted \$500 for its needs and ordered to report back on its findings to the 1917 legislature." The commission, meeting in Jacksonville on May 7, 1917, announced that "the need of a State institution . . . to properly care for these and all cases of a similar nature . . . is unquestioned, and we must respectfully urge that proper steps be taken to enact such legislation at this session." The commission also recommended a two-year extension in its duties to insure "that the scope of the same be broadened and enhanced."<sup>12</sup> The Florida Senate and House accepted the commission report by a joint concurrent resolution. In 1919, the commission submitted its final findings to the legislature, recommending the establishment of an institution for the feeble-minded. In this two-year interim, the privately funded Russell Sage Foundation, at the request of Governor Catts, also surveyed Florida's social service needs. This report concluded that "Florida has been slow in developing her social institutions." It recommended that "Florida should take immediate steps to protect these unfortunate children [feeble-minded], not only as a matter of humanity toward this helpless and innocent class, but also as a matter of protection to the community."<sup>13</sup> The reports of the state commission and the Rus-

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10. "From Ponce de Leon's Time to Ours," *The Survey* 39 (March 24, 1917), 729. See also *Yearbook of the Florida Federation of Women's Clubs, 1915-1916*, 80, P. K. Yonge Library.

11. *Laws of Florida* (1915), 2 vols., I, 263.

12. "Florida Commission for the Study of Epilepsy and Feeble-Mindedness Report," Jacksonville, Florida, May 7, 1917, *Florida House Journal* (1917), 2 vols., I, 1345-46.

13. Hart. "A Social Welfare Plan for Florida," 31.

sell Sage Foundation proved influential in the authorization of a state institution for the feeble-minded.

The bill signed by Governor Catts on June 7, 1919, did not provide for a building site for the new institution. It stipulated that "the new colony should be located at some place . . . where sufficient arable lands may be had."<sup>14</sup> Reform leaders believed that patients could work the land under supervision and grow enough food for the institution to become self-sufficient. Local officials from around the state recommended twelve sites as possible locations for the institution. The governor and the cabinet reduced this list to two areas in Hillsborough and Alachua counties. The proposed Alachua County location was situated on a 602-acre plot at the Daysville railroad station of the Seaboard Coast Line. Located approximately two miles northeast of the center of Gainesville, it possessed the advantage of "large acreage, a great variety of lands, and a railroad station and spur line."<sup>15</sup> The site fronted on State Road 24, which ran from Gainesville to Waldo where it connected to Highway 301. This would provide easier access to the property for parents and other visitors. Alachua County commissioners increased their initial offering to a total of 3,000 acres in the hopes of obtaining the institution. After receiving final approval from the Seaboard Line for railroad frontage rights at the Alachua County site, the board of managers of the institution selected it as the location at a meeting in Gainesville in February 1920. Just prior to this public announcement, the Gainesville Sun boasted that it seemed "now Positive the State Institution will be built here."<sup>16</sup>

The fact that the University of Florida was also located in Gainesville does not seem to have influenced the decision to locate the new institution there. The relationship between the Florida Farm Colony and the University of Florida remained unfulfilled during the next quarter century. In the major area of cooperation, the University's College of Agriculture provided technical assistance to the Colony's working farm. University classes, especially summer programs for teacher education, also periodically toured the Farm Colony campus. In 1937, Farm

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14. *Laws of Florida* (1919), I, 232.

15. *Florida House Journal* (1919), II, 1767.

16. *Gainesville Sun*, February 17, 1920.

Colony Superintendent Dr. J. Maxey Dell reported his chagrin at the lost opportunity for coordinated action. "It seems, especially in view of the proximity of this institution to the University of Florida," he wrote, "that unutilized facilities exist whereby students, future school teachers, and parents might be given more actual experience."<sup>17</sup>

The enabling legislation officially named the new institution the Florida Farm Colony for Epileptic and Feeble-Minded Persons. Recognizing the unique mission of the institution, the Colony would be directed by a special five-member board of managers instead of the Board of Commissioners of State Institutions, as might have been expected. The Board of Commissioners, comprised of the governor and the elected state cabinet, supervised all other state facilities, including the Florida Hospital for the Insane in Chattahoochee. The Farm Colony's board of managers, on the other hand, was composed of the governor and the state superintendent of public instruction, serving as ex-officio members, and three other members to be appointed by the governor, with senate approval. These three "public spirited citizens" would have to include a physician and at least one woman, in recognition of the medical and humanitarian needs involved in the training of the feeble-minded.<sup>18</sup>

The new Farm Colony board was responsible for selecting a superintendent to manage the institution. In February 1921, the board named Dr. J. H. Hodges of Gainesville to replace the interim superintendent, Dr. Lorin Green. Hodges had graduated from Baltimore Medical School in 1886, and had also matriculated at The Johns Hopkins University and Harvard. He had a general medical practice in Gainesville, and had served as a physician at the University of Florida infirmary, as president of the Florida Medical Association, and as chairman of the Florida National Bank. He had no special training in the care

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17. For agricultural cooperation, see University of Florida folder, vault files, G.S.C. For university students visiting the Colony, see, for example, the superintendent's diary entry for July 36, 1926, p. 55: "Course of instruction, part of course in Sociology, started at Colony. The students, twelve in all, are summer students at the University of Florida." Superintendent's Diary, vault files, G.S.C. Dell's comment from *9th Biennial Superintendent's Report, 1935-1937* (pamphlet, n.p., n.d.), 14, vault files, G.S.C.

18. *Laws of Florida* (1919), I, 233.

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and treatment of retarded individuals. In spite of his lack of specific experience, the *Gainesville Sun* was enthusiastic about Hodges's appointment. "The selection of Dr. Hodges would call forth an equally unanimous expression of approval from all sections of the state, when it becomes known . . . that the board . . . has secured the services of an eminent business man as well as an eminent physician."<sup>19</sup> The Florida Farm Colony eventually reflected its first superintendent's medical outlook towards the problems of retardation.<sup>20</sup>

The Farm Colony embraced the dual national concerns for protection for and from the feeble-minded. In his second biennial report, Superintendent Hodges wrote, "In developing a colony . . . the entire organization must be built upon the . . . patient."<sup>21</sup> While Hodges appeared concerned about the Colony's residents, legislators organizing the institution made the case clearly for social control. "This colony shall include the 3 departments of asylum, school, and colony co-ordinated and conducted as integral parts of a whole," the bill establishing the institution stated, "to the end that these unfortunates may be prevented from reproducing their kind, and the various communities and the state at Large relieved from the heavy economic and moral issues by reason of their existence."<sup>22</sup> These antithetical attitudes—humanitarianism and social control—prevented a coherent vision of how to manage the feeble-minded patients housed at the Farm Colony. Both extremes, however, recognized the importance of the Colony's function. The 1927-1929 *Biennial Superintendent's Report* noted that "the subject [of feeble-mindedness] touches every phase of public welfare."<sup>23</sup> A

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19. *Gainesville Sun*, February 13, 1921. For biographical information on Hodges, see *ibid.*, February 4, 1937.

20. Neither the second superintendent, Dr. J. H. Colson who served from 1929 to 1936, nor Dr. J. Maxey Dell who became superintendent upon Colson's death and served until 1944, had little direct knowledge of the medical and educational problems of mentally retarded individuals when the Board of Commissioners appointed them. See F. W. Buchholz, *History of Alachua County, Florida* (St. Augustine, 1929), 213-17 and 290-93 for biographical and genealogical information on Colson and Dell.

21. *2nd Biennial Superintendent's Report 1921-1923* (pamphlet, n.p., n.d.), 26, vault files, G.S.C.

22. *Laws of Florida* (1919), I, 235.

23. *5th Biennial Superintendent's Report 1927-1929* (pamphlet, n.p., n.d.), 8, vault files, G.S.C.



1936 newspaper article entitled "Gentle Understanding Given to Afflicted Children" further emphasized this point by categorizing the Farm Colony as "one of the state's most important social institutions." This article showed that humanitarian care and social control did not always operate as mutually exclusive variables. "Training in behavior while at school," it reported, "orderly marching to school and meals, and discipline in general conduct is a valuable part of the training received."<sup>24</sup>

While debate continued on the Colony's function within the broader context of the state's social welfare policy, the development of the facility proceeded slowly. By the summer of 1921, three buildings— an administration and dormitory building, a kitchen and dining hall, and an assistant physician's bungalow— had been constructed at a cost of \$175,000. The Colony began receiving its first patients on November 1, 1921. By Christmas of that year, over 100 patients, all of them female, had been admitted. Plans called for the further development of the institution "on the cottage plan," whereby patients would be housed in small buildings designed to accommodate residents of the same mental level. But construction slowed when the legislature cut \$50,000 from the Colony's 1921 budget proposal of \$200,000. These restraints forced the housing of all patients in five large wards, each designed to accommodate fifty patients, in the dormitory section of the administration building. By June 1923, there were ten buildings on the Colony's grounds. Of the seven new structures, however, only an infirmary and an infirmary annex were devoted specifically to patient needs. This left the main dormitory as the only facility for housing patients.<sup>25</sup> The failure to develop the Farm Colony with individual cottage dormitories thus proved an inauspicious beginning for the institution as it prevented individualized training of the patients.

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24. Unidentified newspaper clipping, 1936, Superintendent's Diary, vault files, G.S.C.

25. *Laws of Florida* (1919), I, 236. The plan for many small cottage-like dormitories was not implemented until after 1945. The large male ward in the administration building, housing over 100 patients, continued to be utilized until that time. See *Gainesville Sun*, December 19, 1921, and January 13, 1922. The seven buildings constructed by 1923 included an infirmary and an infirmary annex, nurses' quarters, a bungalow for male employees, a laundry, a warehouse, and a greenhouse. *Gainesville Sun*, June 19, 1923.

The Farm Colony slowly expanded during the decade of the 1920s. As both its physical plant and the number of patients it served increased, the pressures of outside governmental agencies, medical doctors, politicians, and interested individuals often obscured the institution's function. By 1925, the experiment in separate managerial control ended, and the Board of Commissioners of State Institutions assumed responsibility for the supervision of the Colony. This was in response to an investigation of ex-Governor Catts's alleged political appointment of D. W. Stevenson to the original board of managers five years earlier.<sup>26</sup> The competing political pressures forced the Florida Farm Colony to operate as a kind of way station for miscellaneous deviants rather than as an institution designed to serve a distinct feeble-minded population.<sup>27</sup>

In 1929, in response to the pressures of the position, Superintendent Hodges resigned, emphasizing the difficulty of running an institution for the feeble-minded.<sup>28</sup> The Board of Commissioners elected Dr. James H. Colson to replace him. A longtime Gainesville resident, Colson had served as chief physician for the State Hospital in Chattahoochee and the State Prison Farm at Raiford. He also represented Alachua County in the Florida Senate for two sessions, 1922 and 1923, and it was expected that this experience would allow him to lobby the legislature for increased funding.<sup>29</sup> Colson, like his predecessor Dr.

26. Wayne Flynt, *Cracker Messiah*, 286; *Report of the Joint Committee to Investigate the Official Acts of Sidney J. Catts, Governor of Florida, under Senate Concurrent Resolution No. 4, 1921*, 10-12, P. K. Yonge Library. Stevenson allegedly paid Catts \$7,500 to reinstate the suspended Polk County sheriff. In exchange, Catts was supposed to have appointed Stevenson to the board. The hearings into the case did not provide a clear adjudication of the incident.

27. This phenomenon was not unique to Florida. See Nicholas Hahn, "The Defective Delinquency Movement" (Ph.D. dissertation, State University of New York, Albany, 1979), chapter four; David Rothman, *Conscience and Convenience: The Asylum and Its Alternatives in Progressive America* (Boston, 1980), chapters nine and ten; and Andrew Scull, *Decarceration: Community Treatment and the Deviant— A Radical View* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1984), chapter two.

28. *Gainesville Sun*, May 4, 1929; Superintendent's Diary entry of May 3, 1929, 91, vault files, G.S.C. Hodges returned to the Colony as an assistant physician from August 1934 to June 1935. Superintendent's Diary entries of August 20, 1934, 130, and August 12, 1935, 134-35.

29. *Gainesville Sun*, March 6, 1936; Buchholz, *History of Alachua County*, 213-17.

Hodges, discovered problems in the court procedures of labeling children as feeble-minded and then attempting to send them to the Colony. In 1931, he reported, "[I]t is to be regretted that a noticeable number of children are sent to the institution as intellectually deficient but prove to be only slightly, if at all, retarded."<sup>30</sup> County court and juvenile court judges had committed the majority of these individuals to the Farm Colony for relatively minor criminal offenses. "We have instances where children have been taken into court for truancy and committed to the Colony," Hodges had noted in his earlier 1929 biennial report. "We cannot think that this procedure is a proper disposition of such children."<sup>31</sup>

By the end of the 1920s the Farm Colony had expanded into a facility housing approximately 500 patients of both sexes. These individuals, however, represented fewer than one-half of the total number of patients admitted during this ten-year period.<sup>32</sup> The Colony's population did not remain stable; patients were admitted and discharged quite rapidly. Of the 161 patients listed on the Colony's rolls in 1923-1924, 35.9 percent (ninety-four persons) were discharged in that same biennial period. Since Superintendent Colson reported the major criterion for discharge as "mental condition and physical condition," it followed that high-level moron patients constituted the major proportion of those leaving the institution.<sup>33</sup>

The Florida Farm Colony during the 1920s, therefore, served a population with large numbers of high-level moron and imbecile patients. The Colony staff concluded that many of those committed to the Colony were "unsuitable" for in-

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30. *6th Biennial Superintendent's Report 1929-1931* (pamphlet, n.p., n.d.), 6, vault files, G.S.C.

31. *5th Biennial Superintendent's Report 1927-1929*, 10.

32. The Colony admitted 1,227 persons in the ten-year period 1921-1930, and 584 of those were still at the Colony on December 31, 1930. Of the 584 patients, 156 (26.1 percent) were absent on home visits either for the holidays or preparatory to final discharge. *6th Biennial Superintendent's Report 1929-1931*, 6-7.

33. Of the ninety-four persons discharged in 1923-1924, forty-nine left after successful home paroles. Figures from *3rd Biennial Superintendent's Report 1923-1925* (pamphlet, n.p., n.d.), 13, vault files, G.S.C. Colson's quote from *6th Superintendent Report 1929-1931*, 6-7. Morons comprised 83 percent of the 401 persons discharged from 1925 to 1930. Data from the 4th, 5th, and 6th *Biennial Superintendent's Report*.

stitutionalization and quickly discharged or paroled them to parents, guardians, or relatives.<sup>34</sup> In his 1929 report, Colson stated that he could not “agree that the institution should be used for unruly children, who are not feeble-minded, however much of a problem they may be in the community.”<sup>35</sup> Duval and Hillsborough counties contributed most of these kinds of patients, offering verification to Colony staff that an urban environment, with its complex nonagricultural lifestyle, caused an increase in the feeble-minded population. “Judge Wi[el]se, Juvenile Court, called today,” the superintendent’s diary entry for July 4, 1928, reported, “to confer with the Superintendent relative to children from Tampa who were found to have high I.Q.s.”<sup>36</sup>

A belief in the need to institutionalize sexually active young people also obscured the meaning of feeble-mindedness and caused problems in the admission process. Psychologists, social workers, and physicians felt institutionalization would afford protection for society by preventing the conception of children by feeble-minded parents. According to a North Carolina public health official, “the heredity of feeble-mindedness for the most part is carried from the feeble-minded girl.”<sup>37</sup> Farm Colony statistics show females comprised the majority of those committed for such “problems.” Legislation provided little in the way of official guidelines to aid Colony superintendents and the board in procedures on the admission of sexually active or deviant individuals. Other than the stipulation in the 1919 enabling legislation that the Colony would not accept “any female who is pregnant,” the staff had to rely on their own judgement for all other cases involving “sexual problems.”<sup>38</sup>

Some county judges considered sexual activity as positive proof of feeble-mindedness. Frequently, they committed

34. *4th Biennial Superintendent's Report 1925-1927*, 26.

35. *5th Biennial Superintendent's Report 1927-1929*, 10.

36. Superintendent's Diary, entry for July 4, 1928, 88, vault files, G.S.C. The diary appears to be written by the superintendent's secretary and contains entries for the years from 1923 to 1934. It provides a detailed look at day-to-day life at the Colony.

37. R. F. Beasley, “Save the Feeble-Minded Girl,” *Bulletin of the North Carolina State Board of Charities and Public Welfare* 1 (April-June 1918), 12-15.

38. Application forms, Superintendents' Correspondence, vault files, G.S.C.; *Laws of Florida* (1919), I, 233.

females on this ground alone. A 1931 application from Hillsborough County seemed typical. Judge Albert Wiese of the Tampa Juvenile Court requested institutionalization for an eighteen-year-old white woman because "she will live the life of a common prostitute unless she is given institutional care." Dr. Colson replied that "it is probable that we shall be able to take her in the near future."<sup>39</sup>

In spite of concerns about sexual activities, the superintendents and staff of the 1920s and 1930s rarely mentioned problems with the sexual practices of their patients in their reports and correspondence. Sexual segregation, rigidly enforced by watchful ward attendants, prevented the opportunity for illicit heterosexual contact. Furthermore, the institution provided protection for the feeble-minded female residents from the advances of males outside the institution gates. In 1918, Hastings Hart, author of the plan for a Florida institution, reported that "in a properly ordered institution, these girls [high-level sexually active morons] are gentle, obedient, amiable, religious, helpful, and joyous." In an institution, they "can be fully protected from the dangers that would destroy them if they were turned loose in society."<sup>40</sup>

The age of applicants also presented problems in the admission process to the Farm Colony. The debate over admission ages also raised questions concerning the functions of the institution itself. The Board of Commissioners adopted a directive on September 28, 1926, authorizing "the age limit at which persons are to be received at this Institution be fixed at 6 years and 21 years."<sup>41</sup> These limits remained in effect through 1945, and each superintendent's report cited them as institutional rules. "Once these rules are broken down," Superintendent Hodges

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39. Application form of November 20, 1931, and Colson's reply of November 22, 1931, Superintendents' Correspondence, vault files, G.S.C. According to forms submitted to the United States Bureau of the Census, only six persons were admitted to the Colony in 1931, including two female morons who were admitted after being adjudicated guilty of unspecified sex offenses. "1931 Census Schedule for State Hospitals," vault files, G.S.C.

40. Hastings Hart, quoted in Beasley, "Save the Feeble-Minded Girl," 14.

41. "Minutes of the Board of Commissioners of State Institutions," Minute Book I, 345, September 28, 1926, Florida State Archives, Tallahassee. The board took this action since "there was nothing in the statutes fixing the age limit."

reported in 1927, "the place will fill up with old people."<sup>42</sup> The superintendents felt they had to respond to the judges making applications for individuals both older and younger than the boards designated age limits. From 1932 to 1940, judges made thirty-two applications for persons older than twenty-one and twenty younger than six.<sup>43</sup>

In addition to age restrictions, unwritten convention prevented blacks from being admitted. No statutory or regulatory prohibition concerning the admission of black patients existed. At the Colony's opening, there were plans for the establishment of a black unit, albeit in a Jim Crow setting. "The negro department . . . will be located on the same tract of land," reported the local newspaper, "about one mile from the white group. As yet, no funds have been provided for the negro department."<sup>44</sup> No legislature ever appropriated monies for black facilities. With the cuts in appropriations due to the Depression in the 1930s and the low priority given to the needs of blacks generally, legislators and Farm Colony administrators made no mention of the desirability of serving black patients. J. Maxey Dell, a prominent Gainesville physician who assumed the position of superintendent with the death of Dr. Colson in 1935, reported in 1939 that "we are not in a position to admit any colored cases to the institution nor do we have any colored patients."<sup>45</sup> In spite of this, county judges continued to commit black persons, who were then summarily denied admission by the Colony's staff. Twenty-one black patients were denied admission between 1929 and 1940.<sup>46</sup> No black patient entered the Colony until 1952.

42. *4th Biennial Superintendent's Report 1925-1927*, 7.

43. Superintendents' Correspondence, vault files, G.S.C.

44. *Gainesville Sun*, December 19, 1921.

45. Dell to Edna Hennessee, October 6, 1939, Superintendents' Correspondence, vault files, G.S.C.

46. Superintendents' Correspondence, vault files, G.S.C. County and juvenile court judges could commit individuals to the Farm Colony, often at the request of family members, school officials, probation officers, or county welfare personnel. See Dell to Ida Dann, November 15, 1937, Superintendents' Correspondence, vault files, G.S.C. Superintendents did not have to accept those committed, usually citing age, race, or mental ability of the committed person as grounds for refusal. Superintendents also refused admission, particularly in the 1930s and 1940s, because there simply was no room at the institution. Those individuals refused admission were placed on a waiting list, which numbered over 280 people in 1945. Ellen Whiteside, 1945 *Special Survey of Florida Farm Colony* (pamphlet, n.p., 1945), 5, vault files, G.S.C.

The 1930s witnessed a major shift in the focus of the institution's mission. Larger numbers of low-level patients crowded the Colony's facilities, forcing it to operate mainly as a custodial agency. Many of these admissions were classified as idiots who had difficulty feeding themselves, dressing, and communicating adequately. Admissions of idiot patients jumped from 8.5 percent of the total accepted in 1928 to 31.5 percent in 1938. By 1945, according to one survey report, the Florida Farm Colony had become "filled to capacity in the carrying out of the second of these objectives [custodial care of idiots]."<sup>47</sup> This shift both impacted upon and was caused by staffing problems. With a staff-patient ratio higher than the national average (one staff person to nine patients as opposed to a national ratio of one to six and one-half in 1932, the last year federal census records reported this data), it became easier to give custodial care rather than implement training programs for higher level patients.<sup>48</sup>

A lack of trained social workers to supervise ex-patients on parole and discharge exacerbated the staffs problems, for they often were reluctant to release patients without adequate supervision. "There is no social service connected with the institution," Superintendent Dell wrote in 1937. "Patients who have been discharged are under the supervision only of the person to whom they have been released [parents, guardians, or relatives] ."<sup>49</sup> Reduced state expenditures for the institution during the Depression years also helped turn the Florida Farm Colony into a facility geared towards lower level patients since the custodial care required for these patients cost less than the training involved with higher level residents. In his 1931-1933 biennial report, Superintendent Colson announced that "in January 1932, the number of employees was decreased and salaries were reduced ten percent."<sup>50</sup>

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47. Whiteside, *Special Survey*, 1.

48. *Mental Defectives and Epileptics in Institutions 1932* (Washington, DC, 1935), 24. The situation had not improved by 1945, when Whiteside delivered her survey. She recommended that "an additional ward attendant be placed on each ward." Whiteside, *Special Survey*, 5.

49. Dell to F. M. Register, September 23, 1937, Superintendents' Correspondence, vault files, G.S.C. See also Colson's complaints about the lack of post-discharge supervision in *6th Biennial Superintendent's Report 1929-1931*, 6-7.

50. *7th Biennial Superintendent's Report 1931-1933* (pamphlet, n.p., n.d.), 6, vault files, G.S.C.

Two phenomena account for the change in the Farm Colony to a custodial facility serving larger and larger numbers of low-level patients. First, the institution remained small in size throughout the 1930s. It averaged approximately 500 residents throughout the decade with little increase in patient numbers in spite of an ever-increasing list of those desiring admission. The Farm Colony's problems appeared symptomatic of institutions nationwide, which suffered "overcrowding, long waiting lists, and low staff/patient ratios."<sup>51</sup> Colony superintendents seemed constantly frustrated because the institution's tight budget, small staff, and inadequate physical plant limited the number of admissions. "Not only are we filled up," wrote Superintendent Colson in 1934, "but we have a large waiting list."<sup>52</sup> By 1939, this list had grown to 275 persons, almost 50 percent of the daily average patient population.<sup>53</sup> With few patients leaving on parole or being discharged, the Farm Colony maintained its high proportion of idiot patients since their low functioning usually precluded early discharge.

The ability of superintendents and staff to control admission also facilitated the Colony's shift to serving lower level patients. After the Board of Commissioners ruled in 1929 that superintendents could "dismiss all inmates . . . committed solely on charges of delinquency or truancy," many high-level patients were discharged.<sup>54</sup> Even more importantly, superintendents could refuse applications for morons, despite commitment requests from local judges. Immediately following this board ruling, Superintendent Colson rejected an application for a Tampa man who remained "at present in the City Stockade, charged with being drunk." This applicant could not be committed, Colson stated, because "he is not a fit subject for this institution."<sup>55</sup>

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51. William Sloan and Harvey Stevens, *One Hundred Years of Concern: A History of the American Association on Mental Deficiency* (Washington, DC, 1976), 153.

52. J. H. Colson to Nelle Smith, February 26, 1934, Superintendents' Correspondence, vault files, G.S.C.

53. Waiting list figure was from Dell to Evelyn Edenfield, May 12, 1939, *ibid*. Average patient population for May 1939 was 559 (with forty-seven patients absent on home parole), Patient Movement Records, May 1939, vault files, G.S.C.

54. "Minutes of the Board of Commissioners of State Institutions," Minute Book J, 353, April 2, 1929.

55. Application form of November 12, 1929, and Colson's reply of November 13, 1929, Superintendents' Correspondence, vault files, G.S.C.



A 1931 law made it easier for Colony staff to transfer high-level patients to the Florida State Hospital for the Insane in Chattahoochee when it appeared "more suitable to the needs of any persons committed to the Florida Farm Colony."<sup>56</sup>

The lack of institutional supervision for paroled and discharged patients also led to a decrease in the number of morons on Farm Colony rolls since persons discharged seldom returned to the Colony as re-admissions. Only 5.6 percent of the 1,512 persons admitted to the Colony from 1921 to 1940 were classified as re-admissions, and morons comprised the majority of these. For example, thirteen of nineteen re-admissions in 1927-1928 were classified as morons or higher.<sup>57</sup> Therefore, most discharged and paroled morons never reappeared on institutional rolls. While outside forces continued to press for more moron admissions, the small size of the institution, the relative independence of superintendents in admission decisions, and the low number of morons re-entering the Colony forced the institution to serve more low-level individuals by 1945.

While struggling with the questions of the definition of feeble-mindedness and its effects on admission policies, superintendents also had to grapple with the problems of legislative parsimony and bureaucratic indifference in the running of the Farm Colony. The ostensible centerpiece of vocational training, the farm, proved a case in point. In 1922, a bureaucratic oversight set the farm on a poor financial footing from the outset. A typographical error in the legislative budget request transposed "farm improvements" to "farm implements," and \$7,500 budgeted for improvements could not be spent. Plans for a large farming enterprise had to be postponed. The *Gainesville Sun* reported in 1923 that because of the lost funding, "Farm work has therefore been necessarily restricted."<sup>58</sup> Designed to provide both job training and a source of food for the Colony, the farm provided little of either. Upon retiring in 1929, Superintendent Hodges had reported that the farm remained only "partially

56. *Laws of Florida* (1931), 2 vols., J, 938.

57. *7th Biennial Superintendent's Report 1931-1933*, 23; *10th Biennial Superintendent's Report 1937-1939* (pamphlet, n.p., n.d.), 8, vault files, G.S.C.; *5th Biennial Superintendent's Report 1927-1929*, 23.

58. *2nd Biennial Superintendent's Report 1921-1923*, 23; *Gainesville Sun*, June 19, 1923.

self-sufficient."<sup>59</sup> Seven years later, according to a state auditor's report, "the institution is engaged in various activities producing foodstuffs for the table. Most of these activities resulted in the foodstuffs produced costing more than they would have cost had they been purchased in the open market."<sup>60</sup> The farm also did not provide much vocational training for the patients. In 1936, while only sixteen patients worked at the farm, forty-seven prisoners on loan from the State Prison Farm at Raiford were employed there.<sup>61</sup> Three years later, Superintendent Dell wrote optimistically, "[W]e are working to that end [a self-supporting farm] and believe that within the next few years, same will be accomplished."<sup>62</sup>

While the farm suffered from a lack of adequate funding, other vocational programming underwent similar treatment. Superintendents lobbied for a change in the name of the Farm Colony to reflect better the non-agricultural training taking place there. Dr. Colson wrote in 1931: "The present official name of the institution is, we believe, cumbersome, inapplicable, and unsuitable. It would imply the institution specializes in farming." Two years later, Alachua County state representative Burton Rawls introduced a bill in the legislature to change the name of the institution to the Florida Junior Hospital. In keeping with the trend of legislative indifference, nothing came of the measure, however, and the institutional name remained the Florida Farm Colony until 1957.<sup>63</sup>

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59. J. H. Hodges quoted in *Gainesville Sun*, May 4, 1929.

60. "State Auditor's Report on Florida Farm Colony, June 30, 1935," 5, vault files, G.S.C. The farm produced corn, peanuts, cane for syrup, peas, and other vegetables on approximately 400 acres of cleared land. Dairy cows, chickens, turkeys, and pigs were also raised. Florida Farm Colony Farm Records, vault files, G.S.C. See also "Florida Farm Colony," *Florida Social Welfare Review* 1 (June 1936), 7-8.

61. "State Auditor's Report on Florida Farm Colony," 10-17. The auditor's report also concluded that "comparatively little emphasis has been placed upon farming for vegetables for human consumption" (p. 10).

62. *11th Biennial Superintendent's Report 1939-1941* (pamphlet, n.p., n.d.), 12, vault files, G.S.C.

63. *6th Biennial Superintendent's Report 1929-1931*, 22; *7th Biennial Superintendent's Report 1931-1933*, 18. Superintendent's Diary, entry for May 10, 1933, 124-25. *Florida House Journal* (1933), 412, 430. The House Committee on State Institutions unanimously recommended that Rawls's bill be passed, but there is no mention of it ever reaching the house floor.

In 1925, Superintendent Hodges asked the state for \$20,000 to construct industrial training facilities at the Colony. The legislature appropriated \$250,000 that year to initiate these programs at other institutions throughout the state, but none of this allocation went to the Farm Colony. Legislators presumably felt that few patients could benefit from such activities.<sup>64</sup> Twelve years later, in 1937, Superintendent Dell, requested a "separate building for vocational work." He believed that "a great many of these people are very ingenious in this line of work and with proper training would make for themselves a splendid chance in life."<sup>65</sup> The legislature did not respond to Dell's request and did not allocate funds for such facilities. The 1945 Special Survey on the Colony recommended "more and better-suited job-training programs for the high level patients remaining at the institution."<sup>66</sup> These facilities would not be constructed until the 1950s.

A school program provided some educational and vocational training. Under the tutelage of two teachers, residents were trained in the school building, constructed in 1926, in low-level academic tasks as well as functional skills such as basket making, rug braiding, and waiting tables. Finished products were displayed yearly at the Florida State Fair in Tampa, the Alachua County Fair, and even as part of Florida's official state display at the 1933 Chicago World's Fair. Though superintendents spoke proudly of the school's accomplishments, relatively few of the residents benefitted from the training, especially as the institution became crowded with lower level idiots. In 1936, only 125 residents, out of a total population of over 500, attended classes at the school.<sup>67</sup>

Resident life at the Farm Colony was structured and regimented under the supervision of ward attendants and matrons. While many residents did not attend the formal school, most received training from attendants in, according to Superintendent Hodges, "being punctual, courteous, obedient, truthful,

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64. *4th Biennial Superintendent's Report 1925-1927*, 22.

65. *9th Biennial Superintendent's Report 1935-1937*, 15-17.

66. Whiteside, *Special Survey*, 3.

67. See School Department folder, vault files, G.S.C. For school enrollment figures, see "Report to United States Department of the Interior-Office of Education for the School Year 1935-1936," in *ibid*.

faithful in the performance of his [sic] duties, and neat about his person."<sup>68</sup> Attendants also tried to prevent destructive behavior to fellow residents, to property, and— especially in the case of low-level idiot patients— to themselves. The routine of daily life was occasionally broken by special happenings at the Colony. Usually, these coincided with holidays, especially Christmas. These occasions gave members of various Gainesville service clubs and organizations an opportunity to practice benevolence toward the children at the Colony. In the 1920s when the Colony's population consisted of many high-level morons, off-campus field trips appeared common. Employees took residents to movie theaters in Gainesville, on bus trips around the city, and swimming and picnicking at local springs and lakes during the summer months. As the number of lower functioning residents increased during the 1930s, however, the number of these trips was curtailed as many of these patients were nonambulatory and staff could not ensure their safety.<sup>69</sup>

With the opening of the Florida Farm Colony in 1921, advocates for improved treatment of feeble-minded persons felt the state of Florida would finally meet its social obligations. But by the end of the 1930s, the institution seemed almost like a forgotten place in the minds of the public and officials in Tallahassee. Meeting after meeting of the Board of Commissioners went by with only cursory mention of the Colony. Minutes of board meetings suggest that members rarely discussed the institution, except for financial statements or when they ordered a person committed. That happened five times during the 1930s including once when it was "called to the attention of the Board by the Honorable Spessard Holland."<sup>70</sup> The board never officially met at the Colony facility itself in the 1930s and members rarely visited it individually. In spite of having James Colson and J. Maxey Dell, two former state senators, as superintendents from 1929 to 1945, the Farm Colony received smaller and smaller appropriations from a legislature suffering from the effects of

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68. *4th Biennial Superintendent's Report 1925-1927*, 16-17.

69. See Superintendent's Diary for brief accounts of the special events taking place at the Colony.

70. "Minutes of the Board of Commissioners of State Institutions," Minute Book M, 104, October 9, 1935. Holland was serving as a state senator from Polk County at the time of his request.

the Depression. The 1929-1930 budget of \$375,000 was over \$200,000 larger than the 1932-1933 allocation. It took until the 1939-1940 budget of \$282,000 to begin to return to pre-Depression era levels of funding.<sup>71</sup> Even Gainesville, which had worked hard to get the institution located in that community, seemed afterwards to ignore it. Only eight short articles on the Colony and its activities appeared in the pages of the *Gainesville Sun* in the decade of the 1930s. Where once a 1929 front page headline read "Farm Colony Making Good," by 1937, an article on the Colony on page six ended on the somber note that "due to limited finances and facilities, the staff is limited in exhibiting much of the truly scientific technique which they use." In February 1937, the *Sun* reported the death of Dr. J. H. Hodges in a front page obituary. In discussing his myriad accomplishments, it failed to mention his nine-year stint as superintendent of the Florida Farm Colony.<sup>72</sup>

Federal funding provided some support in the 1930s, a decade filled with frustration for everyone concerned with the Farm Colony. In 1937, the Public Works Administration completed two buildings at the Farm Colony at a cost of \$103,000. A small ward building, with a capacity of thirty beds, gave the institution its first cottage, finally taking a small step toward the original plan of 1921. A 181-bed hospital was also constructed, allowing for the care and isolation of ill patients. This facility replaced the original infirmary, which proved too small to handle either chronic isolation cases or acute problems. The completion of the Alachua County Hospital in Gainesville in 1928 provided better medical facilities for seriously ill patients, but a hospital on the Colony grounds still appeared necessary. The Colony hospital proved especially important, according to Superintendent Colson, "[as] we have gradually accumulated a large number of helpless bedridden idiots . . . [who] require a great deal of individual care."<sup>73</sup> The new buildings helped to

71. See the 4th through 11th *Biennial Superintendent's Report*. The 1932-1933 budget allocation was \$163,000.

72. *Gainesville Sun*, February 23, 1929, June 22, February 4, 1937. The staff did not possess all the "scientific knowledge" the *Sun* reporter wrote about in 1937. In 1945, Whiteside recommended in her survey that the superintendent initiate "a study . . . of methods of teaching mentally deficient children now in use by other institutions." Whiteside, *Special Survey*, 6.

73. *8th Biennial Superintendent's Report 1933-1935* (pamphlet, n.p., n.d.), 9, vault files, G.S.C.

"relieve the congestion that had hampered the institution for some time," but without adequate staffing (only one nurse served the Colony in 1940) and with little funding from the legislature for furnishing the structures, these physical additions provided only temporary help.<sup>74</sup>

The outbreak of World War II exacerbated Florida Farm Colony's problems. The labor shortage during the war made it "extremely difficult throughout the biennium [1943- 1945] to procure and keep a sufficient number of employees to insure even the minimum standard of care for our patients."<sup>75</sup> In April 1944, the secretary of the Board of Commissioners wrote to Superintendent Dell inquiring as to the "results of your efforts to secure sufficient number of attendants for your institution. . . . [The board] would also like for you to advise just what procedure you are following in trying to secure said attendants." Dell could make no reply, other than to complain that "it is still necessary for some of the employees to be on duty for a period of 18 hours."<sup>76</sup>

Dell also received criticism from the board over his failure to complete federal census reports. In January 1944, the Census Bureau mailed forms to all state hospitals and institutions requesting information on patient movements during the previous year. Board secretary J. Robert McClure reminded Dell on January 24, "[T]he Board wishes you to return the completed forms directly to the Bureau of the Census at the earliest possible time, and in any instance, not later than March 1, 1944." Almost nine months later, on September 12, McClure wrote Dell again, prodding him to return the late forms "as soon as possible." Finally, two weeks later, Dell wrote the board, informing them that he had forwarded the forms to the government."

74. *Gainesville Sun*, June 15, 1937; "Florida Farm Colony," 7; For the number of nurses, see United States Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Patients in Mental Institutions 1940* (Washington, DC, 1943), 158.

75. *13th Biennial Superintendent's Report 1943-1945* (pamphlet, n.p., n.d.), 9, vault files, G.S.C. See also "Minutes of the Board of Commissioners of State Institutions," Minute Book P, 405, February 29, 1944.

76. J. Robert McClure to Dell, April 11, 1944, and Dell to McClure, April 15, 1944, Board of Commissioners folder, Superintendents' Correspondence, vault files, G.S.C.

77. McClure to Dell, January 24, 1944, September 12, 1944, and Dell to McClure, September 25, 1944, *ibid.*

Dell resigned, "effective immediately," at the end of September 1944, a week after he returned the forms. He gave no reason for the resignation, but presumably the difficulties of eight years of holding the position of superintendent played a major role in the decision. He had submitted his resignation twice earlier, in May and July of 1944, but the board had refused, without comment, to accept either offer. While finally accepting his resignation at the end of September, the board allowed Dell to remain as the Colony's chief physician.<sup>78</sup> The board replaced him as superintendent with Raymond Philips, the longtime bookkeeper and business manager of the Colony. Appointed as acting superintendent in October 1944, Philips assumed full control on July 17, 1945. He became the first non-medical superintendent in Farm Colony history. Philips, a native of Sanford, Florida, and a graduate of Rollins College, had been employed at the Colony since 1932. With his long Farm Colony tenure, Philips had experience working with the Colony's residents and staff, as well as knowledge of its financial affairs. As superintendent until 1970, he oversaw many changes in institutional funding and demographics. In January 1945, while still acting superintendent, Philips proposed "the present goal be to plan for a population of 1000."<sup>79</sup>

In the 1940s state legislators finally began to recognize the many problems at the Florida Farm Colony and to take steps to correct them. On April 23, 1945, the Florida House and Senate authorized the appointment of a joint committee to investigate conditions at the Florida Farm Colony, the Florida State Hospital for the Insane in Chattahoochee, and the state industrial schools in Marianna and Ocala. The proposed building of a

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78. Dell submitted his resignation in May and July of 1944. The board gave no reason for rejecting Dell's requests. Philips applied for the position in August. The actions of the board in September 1944, appointing Philips as superintendent, is missing as Minute Book Q of the "Minutes of the Board of Commissioners of State Institutions" can not be located at the Florida State Archives. "Minutes of the Board of Commissioners of State Institutions," Minute Book P, 432, May 11, 1944, 493, July 25, 1944, 497, August 1, 1944.

79. Raymond Philips to John Wigginton, January 12, 1945, Board of Commissioners folder, Superintendent's folder, vault files, G.S.C. For more on Philips, see *Gainesville Sun*, March 29, 1970, and October 8, 1983.

second hospital for the insane in Avon Park precipitated the widespread investigation.<sup>80</sup> Governor Millard Caldwell appointed Ellen Whiteside, a Miami social worker, to conduct the investigation of the Farm Colony. Whiteside presented her committee report on May 5, 1945, describing a "drab word picture of conditions at Florida Farm Colony."<sup>81</sup> Deteriorating physical facilities, a shortage of trained personnel, and the lack of patient discharges due to their low functioning level all contributed to an institution badly in need of help. The continued presence of large numbers of low-level idiots raised the average patient age at the Colony to twenty-five and the average length of commitment to thirteen years. This circumvented the original mission of the Florida Farm Colony as a training school for feeble-minded children. The report did not just dwell on revelations of bad conditions, but proposed solutions to the Colony's problems. The committee made ten recommendations, all in consultation with acting Superintendent Philips, who was praised as "able, conscientious, and deeply aware of the very grave problems."<sup>82</sup> These proposals became the groundwork for the expansion of Florida Farm Colony throughout the remainder of the 1940s and beyond. Armed with this report, Philips proved successful in getting the legislature to appropriate larger sums of money for Colony expansion. Only one day after the Whiteside report was made public, the legislature increased the general biennial Farm Colony appropriation of \$171,000 by \$66,000, to be used at the discretion of Superintendent Philips.<sup>83</sup>

The Whiteside report and the appointment of Raymond Philips as permanent superintendent marked a turning point in the development of the Florida Farm Colony. The Colony had so far failed in its mission of protection for and from the feeble-minded because superintendents and outside officials, particu-

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80. *Florida House Journal*, April 23, 1945, 170-71. See also *Tampa Tribune*, April 24, 1945.

81. Jacksonville *Florida Times-Union*, May 9, 1945; *Tallahassee Democrat*, May 9, 1945; *Gainesville Sun*, May 9, 1945.

82. Whiteside, *Special Survey*, 6.

83. Jacksonville *Florida Times-Union*, May 10, 1945; *Gainesville Sun*, May 10, August 5, 1945.



larly judges, had competing visions of the institution's purpose and function. Inadequate legislative funding, comparatively weak superintendents, and an almost invisible state presence added to the Colony's woes. With the appointment of Raymond Philips as superintendent, the problems associated with a small, underfunded, overcrowded institution for low-level patients were replaced by the problems of a large multipurpose facility. The Florida Farm Colony, in its first quarter century, had reflected national fears about the menace of the feeble-minded. The next twenty-five years, however, would bring different problems, as Philips struggled to have the Florida Farm Colony fulfill its mission of care and training of the state's mentally handicapped individuals.