

1997

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### Recommended Citation

Patterson, Gordon (1997) "Ditches and Dreams: Nelson Fell and the Rise of Fellsmere," *Florida Historical Quarterly*. Vol. 76 : No. 1 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/fhq/vol76/iss1/3>

## Ditches and Dreams: Nelson Fell and the Rise of Fellsmere

by GORDON PATTERSON

ON April 28, 1911, both the *St. Lucie Tribune* and the *Fort Pierce News* published descriptions of an innovative land development project. The Fellsmere Farms Company proposed to drain 118,000 acres of land at the headwaters of the St. Johns River. Since 1910, the newly formed corporation had “shunned publicity, preferring to devote all the time, energy and money to development work.”<sup>1</sup> Fellsmere Farms Company was the brainchild of Nelson Fell, an itinerant Englishman and hydraulic engineer with more than three decades of experience in directing land development in Florida. The company’s unusual name, a 1913 sales brochure explained, was a combination of the founder’s name and the word “mere,” which meant “a great watery place.”<sup>2</sup> Fell intended the Fellsmere Farms Company to be the culmination of his life’s work.

Unfortunately, Fell and his associates underestimated the challenge of turning a “great watery place” into rich farmland. Six years later, in 1917, the *Fellsmere Tribune* announced “the close of . . . the greatest and most complete drainage proposition in Florida.”<sup>3</sup> Thirty-three miles of levies had been constructed, and 67 miles of canals and 215 miles of drainage ditches had been dug.<sup>4</sup> The project’s magnitude, however, proved greater than Nelson Fell’s resources. In 1916, Fellsmere Farms Company was forced into receivership. A number of factors contributed to the company’s demise. Skepticism about Florida land promotions, concern about the intensifying international crisis, and the outbreak of World War I robbed the company of needed capital. Poor management of the sales program further complicated the company’s perilous posi-

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1. *Fort Pierce News*, April 28, 1911.
2. “Fellsmere Farms Florida,” sales brochure, Fellsmere Sales Company, June 1913, 6, Walter Siewert Collection, Special Collections, Evans Library, Florida Institute of Technology, Melbourne.
3. *Fellsmere Tribune*, January 13, 1917.
4. *Ibid.*

tion. On July 31, 1915, nature delivered a final, devastating blow. Torrential rains forced many to flee. Eight inches of rain fell on the already waterlogged land. The company struggled to repair the damage, but ultimately, the task proved too great. On January 1, 1917, the assets of Fellsmere Farms Company were sold to the highest bidder at the courthouse door in Fort Pierce.<sup>5</sup>

The rise and fall of the Fellsmere Farms Company reveals much about the nature of Florida in the first decades of the twentieth century. Fellsmere was part of the larger campaign to transform Florida's marshes, swamps, and "watery places" into productive farms and communities. The story of Nelson Fell's attempt to create an agricultural community at the headwaters of the St. Johns offers an insight into the formative stages of the technological optimism that has determined much of Florida's history in the twentieth century.<sup>6</sup>

E. Nelson Fell was born in Nelson, New Zealand, in 1857, the youngest son of Alfred Fell, a native Englishman and proprietor of a "tremendously successful" wholesale business.<sup>7</sup> In 1859, Alfred Fell returned to England with his wife and seven children. Fell's father sent him to the prestigious Rugby School and to the Royal School of Mines. Later Nelson spent a year in Heidelberg studying German engineering techniques before taking a job working for his older brother Arthur. Over the next thirty years, the elder Fell dispatched his brother around the world to supervise numerous mining and engineering projects. In 1884, Arthur Fell sent Nelson to Florida.<sup>8</sup>

Central Florida underwent a British invasion in the 1880s. Governor William Bloxham's sale of four million acres of land to Hamilton Disston, a Philadelphia industrialist, in 1881 launched a

5. Walter Siewert, "A History of the Fellsmere Drainage District (Now) Fellsmere Water Control District," n.d., 8, in Siewert Collection; *Fellsmere Tribune*, January 6, 1917.

6. For information on land drainage and development in Florida, see Nelson M. Blake, *Land Into Water—Water Into Land: A History of Water Management in Florida* (Tallahassee, 1980); Mark Derr, *Some Kind of Paradise: A Chronicle of Man and Land in Florida* (New York, 1989); John Rothchild, *Up for Grabs: A Trump Through Time and Space in the Sunshine State* (New York, 1985); Charlton W. Tebeau, *A History of Florida* (Coral Gables, 1971).

7. Mrs. W. L. Wastney to William E. Ashburn, August 18, 1977, William Ashburn Collection, in the possession of Clarence Korker, Fellsmere, Fla.

8. Olivia Fell Vans Agnew to Mrs. Mary McClure, November 14, 1965, Siewert Collection.

second, albeit unofficial, English period in Florida history. Within a year, Disston had sold half of his holdings to Sir Edward Reed. Reed, a British capitalist, proposed to develop central Florida as an investment opportunity for English and European entrepreneurs. Reed and his friend Jacobus Wertheim organized the Florida Land and Mortgage Company, which aggressively marketed Florida land in England and on the European continent.<sup>9</sup>

Advertisements describing the rich possibilities present in central Florida regularly appeared in English newspapers throughout the 1880s and 1890s. Publicists told prospective buyers that Florida was a place where pleasurable surroundings, commercial opportunity and a healthy climate combined to create a veritable paradise. By the mid-1880s a contemporary observer noted, “every train and steamer from the north bears hither its English party. Some come to *this sunland of palm and pine* for pleasure, some for health; some— and these are the majority— come bent on making here the fortune they failed to make in the old world.”<sup>10</sup>

Nelson Fell belonged to the third group. With six older brothers and sisters, his prospects for a sizable inheritance were meager. He was working on a mining project in Colorado when Arthur Fell, eager to join the land bonanza, proposed that he go to central Florida. At twenty-seven, Nelson Fell was a seasoned engineer with experience in England, Brazil, and the American West. Florida was the new frontier. Arthur Fell and his partner purchased twelve thousand acres east of Lake Tohepekaliga, two thousand of which were reserved for a townsite called Narcoosee, a derivation of the Maskóki: word for “bear.” Fell’s company divided the remainder of the land into small farms that ranged from two to ten acres in size. The senior Fell placed his brother and Lieutenant Colonel William Edmund Cadman in charge of the project. Cadman managed the company’s day-to-day affairs; Fell oversaw the effort to reclaim 2,500 acres of marshland. Arthur Fell further instructed his younger brother to establish a community “commensurate with his family standing.”

9. Tebeau, *A History of Florida*, 278-79.

10. Iza Duffus Hardy, *Oranges and Alligators: Sketches from South Florida Life* (London, 1887), 12.

11. Olivia Fell Vans Agnew to Mrs. Mary McClure, November 14, 1965, Siewert Collection; Alma Hetherington, *River of Long Water* (Chuluota, 1980), 37; Joseph D. Cushman, Jr., *The Sound of Bells: The Episcopal Church in South Florida, 1862-1969* (Gainesville, 1976), 43; *Vero Beach Press-Journal*, June 14, 1981.

More than two hundred English immigrants had come to Narcoosee by 1888. By then, the burgeoning town possessed a post office, a blacksmith's shop, a carpenter's shop, a real estate office and, most importantly, a railway depot. Fell recognized that the viability of this primarily agricultural colony was dependent upon access to reliable transportation. Initially, a steamboat called the Colonist linked the Narcoosee English settlement to St. Cloud and Kissimmee. Fell eventually secured an extension of the Sugar Belt Railroad to Narcoosee in the late 1880s. Access to the railroad allowed local citrus farmers to expand their groves and in general provided a firm basis for the town's commercial success.<sup>12</sup>

Nelson Fell prospered during this period. He married Anne Palmer, the daughter of a New York judge. Two daughters and a son followed in short order. His engineering expertise won him both commercial success and civic responsibilities. He built a house on a promontory jutting into Lake Tohepekaliga that became known as Fell's Point. In 1890, Fell won a seat on the Osceola County Commission. Captain Rufus E. Rose, chairman of the county commission and one of Disston's advisors, shared Fell's optimism for Florida's economic future and backed Fell's entry into politics.<sup>13</sup>

The boom, however, did not last. The first signs of economic distress surfaced in 1891, and by late 1892, Florida was in the midst of an unprecedented series of railroad, bank, and commercial failures. The worsening economic conditions culminated in the general panic of 1893. British immigration slowed, and those already in Florida looked to their citrus groves for salvation. The crash destroyed Hamilton Disston. He mortgaged his central Florida holdings; three years later he defaulted on his loans. In April 1896, Disston put a pistol to his head and committed suicide while sitting in a bathtub in his Philadelphia home.<sup>14</sup>

Nature and international political conditions conspired during the next two years to undermine Nelson Fell's English colony. The winter of 1894 was unseasonably cold. On December 27 the temperature dropped to twenty-seven degrees in north Florida. Tampa, according to weather reports, was covered with a thick layer of ice. The cold weather persisted for forty-eight hours, killing many young trees. The next six weeks were unseasonably warm.

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12. Cushman, *Sound of Bells*, 43, 45; Hetherington, *River of Long Water*, 37.

13. Hetherington, *River of Long Water*, 41.

14. Derr, *Some Kind of Paradise*, 96.

Veteran citrus growers watched in dismay as green shoots and blooms appeared on their trees. On February 7, 1895, a killer freeze covered the state. Temperatures plummeted. The devastation was overwhelming. Overnight, citrus farmers lost their entire holdings. No part of Florida was untouched.<sup>15</sup>

A chill in the relations between Britain and the United States further threatened the status of Florida's English immigrants. In 1895, a border incident in British Guiana touched off an international dispute between Britain and Venezuela. By 1897, the two countries were on the verge of war. President Grover Cleveland criticized the English position, maintaining that Britain had violated the Monroe Doctrine. Lord Salisbury, who headed the English foreign office, replied icily to President Cleveland's criticism. He declared that the United States had "no practical concern" in the South American boundary dispute. Cleveland answered with an ultimatum: Britain must submit to American arbitration or face the consequences. The two great Atlantic powers edged toward a declaration of war.<sup>16</sup>

The British-Venezuelan crisis was a turning point for many of central Florida's English immigrants. Some were still British subjects; others held military commissions that bound them to defend the Crown. As the crisis worsened many Anglo-Floridians packed their bags. Bishop William Gray, leader of the Episcopal Diocese of South Florida, publicly lamented the English exodus.<sup>17</sup>

In 1897, Britain agreed to American arbitration. The rumors of war, however, had unnerved Florida's English immigrants, and many chose to leave Florida. Consequently, Narcoosee's growth stalled. The panic of 1893, the freeze of 1894-95, Disston's suicide in 1896, and what Bishop Gray called "the threatening clouds of war" combined to deliver a mortal blow to Fell's dream of paradise in Florida.<sup>18</sup>

Nelson Fell faced a difficult choice. He could remain in Narcoosee, or he could look for new opportunities. Fell hesitated; Narcoosee was not destined for greatness. Once again, his brother provided him with a chance to recoup his losses. Arthur Fell sum-

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15. Cushman, *Sound of Bells*, 53; Morton D. Winsberg, *Florida Weather* (Orlando, 1990), 46.

16. Cushman, *Sound of Bells*, 57.

17. Ibid.

18. Ibid.

moned his brother to London to discuss the possibility of purchasing a copper mine and refinery in central Asia. Fell left his family at Fell's Point and went to London in 1901.

Although he knew little about mining conditions in Russia, the older Fell, now a member of the British Parliament, had learned that there were tremendous investment opportunities in central Asia and proposed that Nelson go to Siberia, which he did in January 1902. He chose Charles Piffard, one of his Narcoosee associates, to travel with him across Russia. Fell and Piffard made their way eastward nearly two thousand miles on the Trans-Siberia Railroad. The two men covered the final six hundred miles on horseback.<sup>19</sup>

Years later Fell described his work in central Siberia in a book entitled *Russian and Nomad: Tales of Kirghiz Steppes*, published in 1916. Conditions were primitive. The opportunities for profit, however, were unlimited. Fell returned to London and wrote a glowing report. In 1903 he returned to Russia, charged with the responsibility of negotiating the purchase of the Spassky Copper Mines. He sent for his wife and children who were still living at Fell's Point near Narcoosee. Finally, he convinced Patrick A. Vans Agnew, a young Scotchman, to leave his law practice in Kissimmee and join him as one of his assistants.<sup>20</sup>

Fell flourished during his five years in central Asia. Piffard and Vans Agnew were able assistants. The three men directed the company's smelter and ranged across the Kirghiz steppes, purchasing coal and mining copper. "With new capital the mines and works were developed into an important and successful enterprise, employing a small army of men: Kirghiz carriers, miners and labourers; Russian mechanics, engineers, superintendents, accountants," Fell wrote. "The number of foreigners employed was very small and, both by policy and inclination, we endeavored to work in close and sympathetic harmony with the 'Russians themselves, and the Russian organized system.'"<sup>21</sup> Periodically, Fell dispatched caravans six hundred miles to the north where copper and silver ingots were shipped by rail to Moscow. Fell served as the mine's general manager for five years. His daughter Marian became engaged to Patrick

19. Olivia Fell Vans Agnew to Mrs. Mary McClure, November 14, 1965, Siewert Collection.

20. Ibid.

21. Nelson Fell, *Russian and Nomad: Tales of the Kirghiz Steppes* (New York, 1916), xii.

Vans Agnew.<sup>22</sup> In 1909, Fell returned to the United States a rich man.

At fifty-two, Fell could afford to retire. His family and closest associates were setting out on their own. Vans Agnew opened a law office in Kissimmee, plunged into local politics and became the city's attorney, Daughter Marian worked to complete a translation of selections from Anton Chekov's stories and plays. His other daughter, Olivia, announced her engagement to Patrick Vans Agnew's brother Frank. Fell's son, Nelson, Jr., was preparing to enter Harvard. Charles Piffard used his profits from the Russian enterprise to launch a banking career in New York. Fell was uncertain what course to follow.<sup>23</sup>

His friend and engineering colleague Oscar T. Crosby convinced him to buy a house in Warrenton, Virginia, where Crosby already owned a 350-acre estate. The two men shared numerous interests. Born in 1861, Crosby graduated from West Point in 1882. He served in the Army Corps of Engineers for five years before launching a highly successful career in private industry. By 1900, Crosby had "accumulated a large fortune" sufficient to free him from the "drudgery-of business."<sup>24</sup>

Vans Agnew urged Fell to reconsider his retirement. Vans Agnew believed that there were tremendous opportunities for land development in Florida. Conditions there had changed considerably during Fell's absence; the troublesome nineties were a thing of the past. The state had experienced a population growth between 1900 and 1910, and in 1905, Floridians had elected a new governor, liberal reformer Napoleon Bonaparte Broward. Central to Governor Broward's program was his plan to mobilize the state's resources to reclaim the Everglades. The Everglades drainage plan called for the construction of a system of drainage canals that would "allow surplus water to drain off into the Atlantic Ocean and Gulf of Mexico."<sup>25</sup> Broward and his successor, Albert W. Gilchrist, committed sizable state funds to this ambitious, if environmentally

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22. Olivia Fell Vans Agnew to Mrs. Mary McClure, November 14, 1965, Siewert Collection.

23. Ibid.

24. *Fort Pierce News*, April 2, 1915.

25. Samuel Proctor, "Prelude to the New Florida, 1877-1919," *The New History of Florida*, edited by Michael Gannon (Gainesville, 1996), 280, 282.



disastrous, plan. By 1913, 142 miles of canals and two locks were in place. The state spent nearly \$2 million on the Everglades project.<sup>26</sup>

Fell dispatched his long-time friend, Captain Rose, to scout out the prospects. One of Florida's great boosters, Rose had a unique perspective on land possibilities. He believed that the upper St. Johns region held great promise. Back in Virginia, Crosby listened attentively as Fell discussed the idea of launching a colossal land reclamation project. Crosby had followed the development of Governor Broward's Everglades drainage plan and shared Fell's conviction that private enterprise could do a better job than the state. He believed it possible to drain the region and sell the land for a handsome profit.<sup>27</sup>

Fell spent the following year researching the project. The land that was best suited for the project, he soon learned, was embroiled in litigation. Interest in developing the headwaters of the St. Johns dated to 1895 when W. W. Russell from Cincinnati purchased 115,000 acres west of Sebastian from the United States Printing Company. In May 1895, Russell dispatched a land surveyor who reported that the elevation of the land would "enable the entire tract to be drained at comparatively little cost."<sup>28</sup> Russell created a company, Cincinnatus Farms, to direct the land reclamation project. In November 1895, the *Indian River Advocate* published a report that the Cincinnatus Farm Land Improvement Project would soon start construction on a railroad from Sebastian into the muck land. Eventually, Russell planned to extend the line on to Kissimmee. Russell's advisors, however, had underestimated the magnitude and cost of the project. Work on the project stopped when Russell died in 1900.<sup>29</sup>

No further improvements were made on the tract. The survey reports were put aside. Nothing came of the railroad extension. By 1909 there were eight different claims against the Russell estate. On March 11, 1910, Nelson and Anne Palmer Fell paid a \$63,125 down payment— with \$91,875 outstanding— for title to approximately 118,000 acres of land. Fell's investment came to a little more than \$1.35 per acre.<sup>30</sup>

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26. Ibid.

27. *Vero Beach Press-Journal*, June 14, 1981.

28. *Indian River Advocate*, June 14, 1895.

29. Ibid., November 22, 1895; *Fort Pierce News*, April 1, 1910.

30. State of Florida, Deed of Conveyance, Document 708, November 29, 1909, Ashburn Collection.

The venture's success depended on drainage. Fell and Crosby organized the Fellsmere Farms Company to direct the land reclamation project. At the first meeting of the company's board of directors, held in New York City in June 1910, Crosby was elected president and Fell was named the company's vice president. The board further charged Fell with organizing the company's development. He hired Ernest Every, a fellow Englishman with more than twenty years of engineering experience in New Mexico and Colorado, as the project's general manager.<sup>31</sup>

On September 16, 1910, engineers from the J. G. White Company presented their drainage plans to Fell, who explained the proposal to the board and presented his own analysis. Essentially, the company had two options. One plan called for the construction of a levee surrounding the 450-square-mile area. This would assure that no water would flow onto company lands. The board chose the second plan, which proposed to drain the land using a series of canals. The proposed main canal would run eight miles and would feed into a four-and-one-half-mile outlet canal. The main and outlet canals would be 122 feet wide and 18 feet deep and would run in an easterly direction to the tidewater at the Sebastian River. Five lateral canals, which would be fed by a series of sub-lateral canals, would be dug at two-mile intervals. The objective was that "no point on the property [was to be] more than 675 feet from one of these ditches." Excess water from the entire tract would eventually flow into the middle fork of the Sebastian River.<sup>32</sup>

At a meeting the following week, to further convince the board of the venture's potential, Fell presented a detailed report on land sales in Florida. Near Miami, the Tatum brothers were marketing marl and muck land at fifty dollars per acre. A short distance away from Fellsmere, in Kissimmee Park, land was selling for sixty dollars an acre. Fell was convinced that the company's 118,000 acres would turn a sizable profit for all investors. No insurmountable technological barriers to draining the property existed.<sup>33</sup>

Work started in Fellsmere on February 22, 1911. General Manager Every put four colossal excavators to the task of opening the

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31. Minute Book, Fellsmere Farms Company, June 6, 1910, 25, Ashburn Collection; *Fellsmere Farmer*, April 18, 1912.

32. Minute Book, September 16, 1910, 33; *Fellsmere Farmer*, February 21, 1912; "Fellsmere Farms Florida," 8.

33. Minute Book, September 23, 1910, 35.

twelve-mile-long main canal. Telephone lines were laid so that the main office could be in "touch with every part of the work."<sup>34</sup> By February 1912, the project employed 175 men on a monthly payroll of \$20,000. Every reported to the directors that the dredges were making tremendous progress. In April, Every ordered the opening of the sluiceway which had been cut around the dam on the main canal east of lateral "U," which was located nearest the townsite. Eight thousand acres were reclaimed; settlers arrived almost immediately. The town's population growth kept pace with the dredges' progress. By June 1912, Fellsmere's population of 600 made it the second largest town in St. Lucie County. The company newspaper, *Fellsmere Farmer*, offered a weekly digest of the city's accomplishments.<sup>35</sup>

The Chattanooga-based Securities Underwriters Corporation organized the national sales campaign of the Fellsmere Sales Company. The advertisements in national weeklies such as the *Saturday Evening Post* called attention to the "Fame of Fellsmere" and stimulated tremendous interest. Daily train service assured that the town's two hotels were filled with visitors who had come to Fellsmere to see the wonders of the company's two demonstration farms.<sup>36</sup>

To assist with his project, Fell reassembled his Siberian team in 1913. Vans Agnew, involved in the project from the beginning, served as the company's attorney. In 1913, Charles Piffard left New York to organize the desperately needed Fellsmere State Bank. Investors purchased capital stock in the bank worth \$25,000. The Fellsmere Farms Company deeded a lot on the northwest corner of Broadway and Colorado Streets to Piffard for the bank's building, and Fell served on the bank's board of directors.<sup>37</sup>

On March 1, 1913, Fell and Crosby visited Fellsmere. Every showed them the progress the dredges were making on the main canal and laterals. In town, Fell and Crosby addressed the newly formed Farmer's Fraternity. Crosby told the audience that he was "gratified in the progress that [was] being made in the reclamation of the vast tract of land and was particularly gratified with the class of buildings now being constructed in the town of Fellsmere."<sup>38</sup>

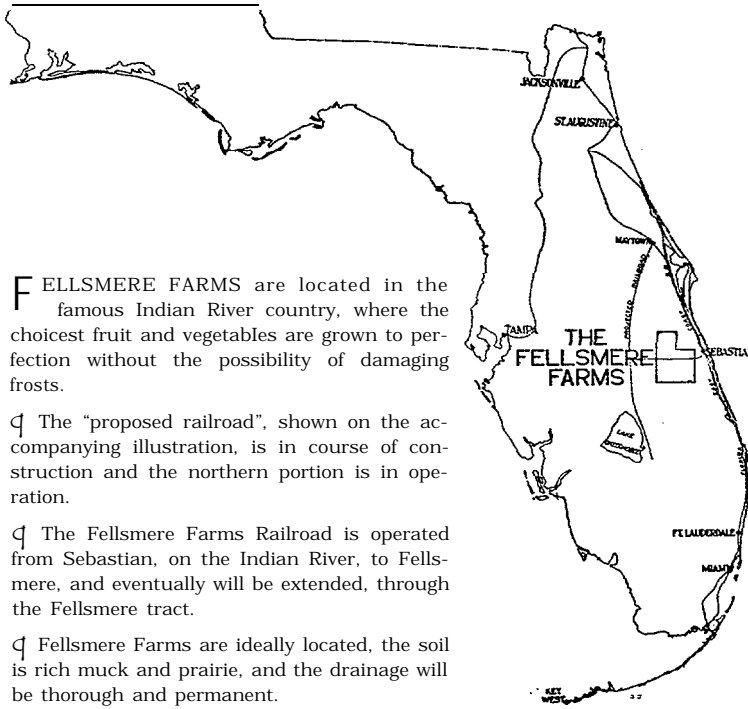
34. *St. Lucie Tribune*, April 28, 1911; *Fellsmere Farmer*, February 21, 1912.

35. *Fellsmere Farmer*, February 21, 1912, April 1, 1912, July 10, 1913.

36. *Ibid.*, July 10, 1913.

37. *Ibid.*, February 20, 1913.

38. *ibid.*, March 6, 1913.



FELLSMERE FARMS are located in the famous Indian River country, where the choicest fruit and vegetables are grown to perfection without the possibility of damaging frosts.

¶ The "proposed railroad", shown on the accompanying illustration, is in course of construction and the northern portion is in operation.

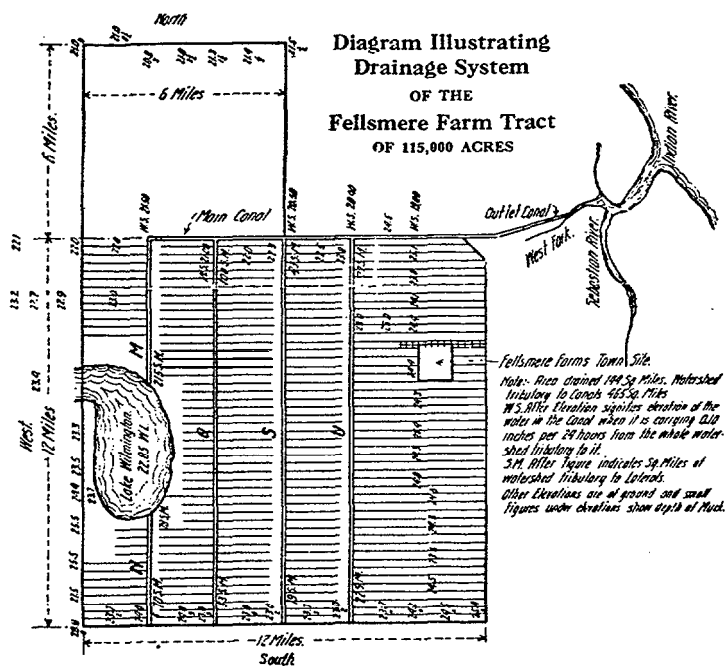
¶ The Fellsmere Farms Railroad is operated from Sebastian, on the Indian River, to Fellsmere, and eventually will be extended, through the Fellsmere tract.

¶ Fellsmere Farms are ideally located, the soil is rich muck and prairie, and the drainage will be thorough and permanent.

Location of Fellsmere. Printed in the *Fellsmere Farmer*; February 21, 1912.

Three different problems combined to undermine the company's success in 1912 and 1913. Disturbing reports from the Everglades began to reach Fellsmere. Land investors arrived in South Florida and discovered that their land was still under water. In February 1912, the scandal broke. Unscrupulous land sharks had defrauded thousands of investors. Congress ordered an investigation of the Department of Agriculture's role in the Everglades drainage project. The hearings focused the nation's attention on Florida.<sup>39</sup> The scandal posed a potential threat to Fellsmere Farms. To calm jittery investors, the *Fellsmere Farmer* published a letter from Representative Frank Clark who served on the congressional committee investigating the Everglades project. "Gentlemen," Congressman

39. Ibid., February 21, 1912.



Fellsmere Farms drainage system. Printed in the *Fellsmere Farmer*, February 21, 1912.

Clark wrote to the company's directors, "it is with regret that I learn that the present investigations of conditions in connection with the draining of the Everglades, in which I am so deeply interested, is tending by inference to injure Fellsmere Farms."<sup>40</sup> Later that month, Fell and Oscar Crosby led a party of thirty-six New York investment bankers to Fellsmere to assure them that Fellsmere was a sound investment.<sup>41</sup>

The harm was done. Public confidence in Florida land companies was undermined, and the Fellsmere Farms Sales Company experienced its first setback. On July 8, 1913, the company's auditors reported that "the accounts of the Sales Company. . . were in a very

40. Ibid., March 7, 1912.

41. Ibid., April 4, 1912.

unsatisfactory shape and required the entire re-writing of all records."<sup>42</sup> The company sustained a loss of \$8,105.95 for the year.<sup>43</sup>

The European crisis further threatened British and European investments. Thirty years earlier, Fell had organized a newspaper campaign that brought hundreds of English immigrants to Kissimmee, St. Cloud, and Narcoossee. He planned to use a similar strategy for Fellsmere. In April 1912, Baron Oscar Von Loo, a prominent Belgian banker who had played an important role in a number of "large development projects in many parts of the world," visited Fellsmere.<sup>44</sup> Fell hoped that Baron Von Loo and his financial associates would create a colony of Belgian, Dutch, and French farmers in Fellsmere. Unfortunately, the outbreak of World War I ended the possibility of European investment.

In June 1913, the board of directors reached a final impasse. The \$1 million that the company had set aside for the drainage project was insufficient. A year earlier the board had authorized the issuance of \$500,000 first mortgage gold notes with a five-year term at six percent. This was not, however, enough money to finance the drainage project. The board debated its options. On June 3, 1913, Oscar Crosby resigned from the board and Fell assumed the presidency. Three weeks later J. G. White and S. L. Selden followed Crosby's lead; Patrick Vans Agnew and Ernest Every filled the vacancies. On June 24, 1913, the board authorized the sale of \$200,000 first mortgage notes at ninety percent of par value. Fell promised that henceforward "individual members of the Board of Directors" would receive "regular and detailed monthly reports of the condition of the business of Fellsmere Farms Company and Fellsmere Sales Company."<sup>45</sup>

Nelson Fell, Patrick Vans Agnew, Ernest Every, and Charles Baldwin managed the company's day-to-day business. In Fellsmere, Piffard acted as their unofficial advisor. Every warned Fell and the other members of the executive committee that there were potentially serious problems with the drainage plan. The executive committee ordered Every to "suspend dredges during the summer and open wide the control gates for the purpose of protecting [the]

42. "Report on Audit Fellsmere Sales Company," July 8, 1913, 3, 4, Ashburn Collection.

43. "Report on Audit Fellsmere Sales Company," June 1915, 1, Ashburn Collection.

44. *Fellsmere Farmer*, April 1 & 1912.

45. Minute Book, June 24, 1913, 253.

drained area."<sup>46</sup> By November 1913, Fell realized that the drainage plan had to be revised. Money was needed. The executive committee recommended that the board negotiate a loan of "not less than \$150,000 and preferably it should be \$200,000."<sup>47</sup> One month later the board took up the executive committee's recommendations.<sup>48</sup>

The need for more working capital compelled the company's directors to reorganize both their finances and the drainage project. The board formed a special adjustment committee consisting of five bondholders that would devise a plan for refinancing the company's debt. The committee delivered its findings to the board in March 1914. It recommended that the present bondholders be offered a settlement in which they would receive ten percent of their bond's face value in preferred stock and forty percent in common stock. In return for this premium the company's \$500,000 debenture notes would be reissued as ten-year prior lien bonds. The adjustment committee's recommendations ended on an ominous note. The committee recommended that "the mortgages shall contain some provision to be drafted by the company's attorneys, which will protect buyers of the company's lands in case of foreclosure of the company obligations."<sup>49</sup>

The board approved the adjustment plan in May 1914. One month later the adjustment committee recommended that negotiations be undertaken between the board and the Columbia Trust Company. Finally, the committee proposed that the Columbia Trust Company serve as Fellsmere Farm's trustee.<sup>50</sup>

Fell found himself struggling to resolve three different problems. As president of both the Fellsmere Farms Company and the Fellsmere Sales Company, he was responsible for reorganizing the drainage plan and implementing a new sales strategy. To survive, the company needed both to increase sales and to cut expenditures. Although the voters of Fellsmere had adopted a commission form of government in 1913, a year later the company was still burdened with the town's upkeep.<sup>51</sup>

Fell bore considerable responsibility for company paternalism. Maintenance of the town's tennis courts illustrates this. Fell was an

46. Minutes of the Executive Committee, Minute Book, July 10, 1913, 255.

47. Minute Book, November 7, 1913, 291.

48. Minute Book, December 12, 1913, 298.

49. Minute Book, March 27, 1914, 332-33.

50. Minute Book, May 7, 1914, 343; Ibid., June 22, 1914, 355B.

51. *Fellsmere Farmer*, March 6, 1913.

enthusiastic tennis player. He organized a lawn tennis club which he used during his visits to Fellsmere. In July 1914, the Fellsmere Tennis Club thought it a "reasonable request to ask the Farms Company if it will not pay the cost of the [tennis court's] upkeep." The company's executive committee approved the request.<sup>52</sup>

Subsidizing the tennis club was of little consequence. There were, however, serious problems that had to be addressed. Patrick Vans Agnew confided to Fell that the company faced a potentially devastating legal problem. The problem was disclosed in a personal letter which was included in the board's December 1914 minutes. Four years earlier Fell had employed Captain Rose to represent the company in negotiating "various purchases." Rose's lawyer was a prominent Tallahassee lawyer named R. W. Williams. One purchase of "eight hundred acres" in each of the five townships belonged to a Mr. McCalla from Knoxville. "Mr. McCalla," Vans Agnew wrote, "(formerly, I believe, American Minister to China . . .), had been adjudged insane and his estate was, therefore, being administered by a guardian."<sup>53</sup> In order to execute the sale, Rose's lawyer needed to secure an order of sale from the proper probate court. Unfortunately, Rose's lawyer sought the order in Tennessee. Florida law, however, mandated that a probate court in either Fort Pierce or Titusville rule on the matter. Vans Agnew stumbled upon this irregularity in the midst of the adjustment committee's struggle to reorganize the company's finances.<sup>54</sup>

Attorney Williams' error exposed the company to considerable risk. If the company's title to its initial landholding was in doubt, then every property deed that the company had issued would be thrown into question. At the very least this would be worrisome to the company's deed holders. Worse, the disclosure of this matter might undermine the adjustment committee's efforts to refinance the company's debt. This was an "alarming" possibility. Believing that the irregularities should be disposed of quietly, Vans Agnew set about "curing" the problem at his own expense.<sup>55</sup> Fell and Vans Agnew kept the matter secret for three months. In December 1914, Fell informed the board that Vans Agnew had corrected the problem.<sup>56</sup>

52. Minute Book, July 11, 1914, 35 & 59.

53. P. A. Vans Agnew to Nelson Fell, in Minute Book, December 14, 1914, 383-84.

54. Ibid.

55. Ibid.

56. Minute Book, December 14, 1914, 384.



Fell had four objectives at the end of 1914: finalize the company's adjustment plan; incorporate the town of Fellsmere; expand the drainage plan; and, finally, increase sales. By June 1915, he had succeeded in realizing two of his objectives. The Columbia Trustee Company agreed to accept \$500,000 of first mortgage bonds at six percent per year. This gave the company needed capital. Vans Agnew wrote a charter for the town, which the state assembly approved on April 29, 1915.<sup>57</sup>

Unfortunately, Fell failed to achieve his two most important objectives: the expansion of the drainage program and increased sales. On June 28, 1915, Fell's auditors delivered a devastating supplementary report itemizing the company's problems. The auditors had had difficulty making sense of the company's books. "Owing to poor attention which has been given to filing in the past," they reported, "the files were found to be in a chaotic condition. Correspondence filed in the wrong envelope was the rule rather than the exception."<sup>58</sup> The auditors determined that "during the first four months of this year contract balances aggregating nearly half a million dollars were lapsed on the books, this sum representing approximately one-third of the balances."<sup>59</sup>

The auditors recommended that drastic and aggressive steps be taken to put the delinquent accounts in order. Foreclosure notices, the auditors declared, had to be issued. Fell disagreed. The auditor's recommendations would devastate the community. Fell's copy of the auditor's report has survived with his handwritten notes in the margins. "Yes," Fell scribbled in response to the suggestion to cut back on the company's support of the community, the proposal would save money. However, Fell opposed this measure because it was "harsh [and] dangerous." A few lines farther Fell noted that "no opinion can be formed without knowledge of the local conditions."<sup>60</sup>

The auditor's report, however, could not be ignored. The company had lost a half million dollars in four months. The executive committee formed a special subcommittee to study the auditor's report and identify ways in which economies could be made. In its

57. *Fort Pierce News*, May 7, 1915. The charter went into effect on May 12, 1915. See *Fellsmere Tribune*, January 27, 1917.

58. "Report on Audit Fellsmere Sales Company," June 28, 1915, 1-2, Ashburn Collection.

59. *Ibid.*, 4.

60. *Ibid.*, 5.

August 13 report, the subcommittee announced that land sales had “practically ceased,” collections were falling and, most importantly, “recent heavy rains” presented unanticipated “new problems.” The initial drainage program was inadequate to the task of draining all of the company’s lands. In what proved to be the first step towards the company’s dissolution, the subcommittee recommended that “the sales program . . . be discontinued for the present” and that all of the company’s efforts be placed in “study of possible supplemental construction” necessary to save the drainage project.<sup>61</sup>

During the next three days Fell met with Arthur Crane, a hydraulic engineer with the J. G. White Company, who devised a radically new plan. It was impossible to drain the entire 454-square-mile area of the Fellsmere tract with the existing system. Crane recommended reducing the area to be drained to eighty square miles. Fell agreed. This would secure both the town of Fellsmere and the land that was already sold. The new drainage plan contained an element missing in the 1910 plan: Crane recommended that the dredges be used to build levees that would protect the drainage area.<sup>62</sup>

Fell presented the revised plan to the board on August 17, 1915. In a separate letter to the executive committee he proposed to take control of the entire project for a year. “I have decided,” Fell wrote, “that it is my duty and to the interest of the company that I should go to Fellsmere without delay and devote my whole time and energy to overcoming the now-existing difficulties. I wish to do this without salary or on the conditions of nominal remuneration suggested by the committee. To this consideration I am indifferent.”<sup>63</sup> A week later the executive committee met and gave Fell and Vans Agnew “a free hand . . . in effecting economies.”<sup>64</sup>

There was little that Fell and Vans Agnew could do, however. The “heavy rains” of July 31, 1915, had wiped out many of the farms. Fell sought and received the executive committee’s approval to “effect such adjustments” that would alleviate the suffering of those who had experienced losses because of the “unprecedented

61. Report of Special Subcommittee, Minute Book, August 13, 1915, 449-50.

62. Minutes of Executive Committee, Minute Book, August 17, 1915, 456.

63. Nelson Fell to the Executive Committee of the Fellsmere Company, August 16, 1915, in Minute Book, August 17, 1915, 457.

64. Minutes of Executive Committee, Minute Book, August 23, 1915, 459.

rainfall.<sup>65</sup> Consequently, the company agreed to replace 4,647 citrus trees that were destroyed in the flood.<sup>66</sup>

The town recovered from the flood's devastation. Eight months after the rains, the *Fellsmere Tribune* praised Fell and the company:

For an ordinary company this [flooding] would have been a setback which would have been more than to have put them out of business, but to the powerful organization back of Fellsmere development it was only a test for weak points and as soon as the local engineers had secured the necessary data in the case the officials of the company met and voted an additional appropriation of \$325,000 to be expended in erecting powerful levees to surround Fellsmere and bid defiance to further encroachment of like nature.<sup>67</sup>

The city's 896 residents looked toward the future with confidence. A \$40,000 school building was under construction. Six miles of sidewalks bordered the town's streets. The Marian Fell Library had grown in less than a year to more than thirteen hundred books. "The population," the newspaper maintained, "is of a high type of intelligence, with lofty ideals and wise execution. Progressive in all things, perhaps no better indication of that fact may be given than the unanimous vote of the electorate of the town granting unrestricted suffrage to women."<sup>68</sup> All signs were promising success. Citrus groves planted in 1913 were bearing their first fruit.<sup>69</sup>

Despite the city's optimism, Fell and Vans Agnew faced an insurmountable problem. Fellsmere Farms Company had based its viability on draining the entire tract. The new program called for draining less than fifty percent of the lands. Land sales were halted. Delinquencies increased. The additional \$325,000 allocation exhausted the company's reserves. Nevertheless, Fell refused to foreclose on the company's debtors. "The Farms Company," Fell told the members of the Farmer Producer's Union in 1916, "has not and never will try to profit by the misfortunes of any landowner, nor

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65. Minutes of Executive Committee, Minute Book, September 3, 1915, 465.

66. Minutes of Executive Committee, Minute Book, September 27, 1915, 467.

67. *Fellsmere Tribune*, March 18, 1916.

68. *Ibid.*

69. *Ibid.*

cause embarrassment to those engaged in building Fellsmere Farms." The Producer's Union passed a resolution thanking Nelson Fell for his "considerate and kindly response."<sup>70</sup> Fell's popularity in Fellsmere, unfortunately, could not save the company from financial ruin. The company had spent more than \$1 million on the drainage project. Securing the restricted area outlined in the new proposal required additional capital. The Columbia Trust Company held first mortgage notes that compelled the company to make regular interest payments on the \$500,000 of outstanding notes.

On July 1, 1916, the Fellsmere Company failed to meet its interest payment. The Columbia Trust Company filed suit. The Circuit Court in Fort Pierce placed the Fellsmere Farms Company in receivership, and W. H. Tallis, a New York accountant, was placed in charge of the company's assets.<sup>71</sup> Two years of legal struggles followed.

Nelson Fell and the directors of the Fellsmere Company lost their investment. Their dream of draining the headwaters of the St. Johns failed for a variety of reasons. First, their plan was too extensive. Moreover, they lacked the necessary capital to protect the reclaimed lands. In 1912, the Everglades land scandal undermined public confidence in land sales. The outbreak of World War I scared off potential European investors.

Nelson Fell left Fellsmere in 1917 for his Virginia estate, where he died in 1928. Oscar Crosby, who was directing war relief in Europe when the company collapsed, went on to become an assistant secretary of the treasury under Woodrow Wilson. Patrick Vans Agnew became Jacksonville's city attorney. Ernest Every moved to Melbourne. Charles Piffard remained in Fellsmere as director of the Fellsmere bank and played an active role in the creation of the Fellsmere Drainage District.<sup>72</sup>

Like the Narcoosee colony before it, Fellsmere Farms Company did not flourish. The technological challenge of draining the headwaters of the St. Johns proved too great. Still, Fell and his confederates accomplished much. In the face of tremendous obstacles, and despite their own financial losses, they laid the foundation for a progressive community that aspired to be a "bright spot in the south."<sup>73</sup>

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70. *Ibid.*, January 8, 1916.

71. *Ibid.*, January 6, 1917.

72. *Ibid.* February 22, 1919.

73. *Ibid.*: May 6, 1916: