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Essaying Florida: "From the Perdido..."

by Lamar York

I'm retiring and moving to Florida. That I am not pulling up stakes in a place like Detroit or Chicago is all that ameliorates the crass familiarity of this next move. I'm just one state removed now. Still, I feel silly, almost, telling friends I'm retiring and moving to Florida. "Of course," they say, "you and everybody else your age. So, what else is new?" But, I want to insist, I am not guilty of the great American hegira to warmer climes, particularly Florida. Of all the nomadic paradigms of Americans—white flight to suburbia, crisscrossing the country at the behest of corporate headquarters—the one I least expected ever to imitate is to retire from a working life spent elsewhere and move to Florida. So I think of this next move not as retiring but as returning to Florida. I've got family there, and roots.

I lived in Florida my first thirty years. Now I've lived in Georgia thirty years. I don't have another thirty years left, but whatever is left will be spent in Florida, it appears. I've lived my life in the capitals of the two states, Tallahassee and Atlanta. The place I'm retiring to was the terminus of the first railroad in Florida. Atlanta, where I've lived in Georgia, was called Terminus, because the first railroad stopped there. Yet close together as they are, Georgia and Florida are also very different places. And in them, I've been very different persons.

Life in the two states offer counterpoint—Florida palms, Georgia pines. It's not just that I am a thousand feet higher in the

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air in Georgia than in Florida. It isn't just that in Florida I was a country boy, while in Georgia I've been a city man. In Florida, I was always a young man, just as Ponce de Leon had promised, full of the hardihood of youth, unable to imagine how high I might ultimately rise in the world, but ambitiously sure it would be high. In Georgia, I've always been older, maturer, more like Georgia's serious, colony-building chief executive James Oglethorpe than the romantic wanderer de Leon. In Georgia, I've pretty much known exactly how far I might go, known that the highest I'd go in Georgia was the highest I'd get in life. In Florida, I was a little fish in a small pond. My hometown, my high school, even then my university, seemed small potatoes. Though Florida has come to be regarded lately as a notable place to be from, I think of it as I knew it then, and even life in the capital was small town. In Georgia, it's been little fish in a big pond for me all the way. Atlanta wasn't as highrise then as it is now, but even when I first arrived there Atlanta thought of itself as an important place to be. Maybe that's why a sleepy fishing village on the almost never ruffled shores of the Big Bend Gulf Coast of Florida seems so appealing.

As I begin to think and plan toward the reverse migration, I wonder what kind of Florida awaits me. When I left, it had five million people and was just beginning to think of itself among the really big states of the union. Neil Armstrong had shot off from Cape Canaveral to the moon, but the Mariel-to-Miami boatlift had not commenced, a later journey that would affect Florida's destiny far beyond what a walk on the moon has, reminiscent more of history than of future, of a time when all of man's most immemorial journeys were made over calm or stormy seas, not via the air. Though now securely beyond the original motivation for the space race, the life-and-death struggle with Russia, a race which once had Florida's leaders licking their chops over just how much federal largess might eventually end up in the state, the population nevertheless continues to explode, relentlessly overturning wilderness.

The electorate in Florida has turned decidedly away from itself as a place of second chances to the less forgiving, inflexible new national model. All that benevolent sunshine might just naturally have been expected to foster a more tolerant, inclusive spirit of commonweal. And it will again, in a future day. Florida is, after all, a naturally happy, casual sort of place. But first it must become more comfortable with its new position among the leading states. Florida's distinction will necessarily have to be invented along lines

unlike those already patented by earlier greats. Yet one feels perceptible movement in that direction, moves that sometime reveal how much ground is yet to be gained. When I left Florida thirty years ago, no Florida college football team had even come close to winning the national championship. Interstate 75 was almost complete from Naples to Chicago. My mother and father, the fourth generation of us to come to life in Sumter County, were both still alive and still at home, where home had always been. The Methodist church I left behind was still unflinchingly segregated.

Now I go back, to natal origins I wonder if I will recognize, if scenes I once never expected to leave will offer even the slightest familiarity. My old high school, built by my grandfather as chairman of the Sumter County school board, and attended by both of my parents, as well as all the rest of their generation and mine, was torn down years ago, a new modern one-story air conditioned textile factory look-alike erected on the outskirts of town. New schools are required to insure the necessary parking space for each and every student, all of whom drive to school these days, even if home is just across the street. In Tallahassee, the state capitol, a 1902 structure where I once had a basement office as chauffeur to the Commissioner of Agriculture for the State of Florida, is now a museum, towered over by a high-rise shaft of an insurance headquarters-style office building. The FSU that I attended had 7,000 students, all campus residents. Today it has 35,000 students, almost none campus resident, is always hungry for more, and has awarded more PhDs than it once had undergraduates. It was a girls-only college until ten years before I matriculated. Now it has national championships in football.

So sure that the Florida I knew won't feel like home, I begin to reconstruct my own idea of Florida, one that I can return to at least in memory, knowing the new place called Florida to have become a most remarkably newly made place. Unsure of how I will feel about contemporary Florida, and knowing myself incapable of relocating the place I left, I begin to reproduce a Florida based on the only design I have any control over, that is, the one in my head. Florida has always exercised my imagination, so much so that I decorated my boyhood bedroom with a flag of Florida rather than the one of choice of most boys in my youth, the ubiquitous Confederate battle flag.

In a serious young manhood my love of Florida expanded beyond the state flag. I began collecting books and maps about

Florida. In time, this collection acquired the dimensions of a respectably antiquarian shelf of early histories and travel guides. Florida has somehow always appealed to the imagination of the bookish traveler; because Florida cities feel so new, the many travel guides to early Florida seem as exotic now as the Florida wilderness must have seemed to those long-ago writer-travelers. I came to own a bookcase groaning with Florida materials by the time I knew I would return there, the passion of Florida never having abandoned me. Now, in a remarkably self-satisfying moment, I would sit down in my own library and literally recreate a Florida of my choosing. There were enough pictures and drawings, Seminole vocabularies, histories and descriptions to allow me a substantial canvas on which to draw the earliest of Floridas. This one I could do in my own library. I could recreate Florida just like I wanted to think of it, even before I packed up my books and left Georgia.

In an odd moment of clarity, I chose not the oldest book there on my shelves, momentarily denying my antiquarian inclinations, but rather the one that seemed the most authoritative, the very Constitution of the state I had left thirty years earlier and now proposed returning to. But the initial effort to recreate Florida from the ground up would offer a big surprise. The first definers of Florida began in what seemed like the least likely place for a beginning of Florida. For any traveler since the beginning of map making or regularly scheduled ship travel to the New World, the choice of beginnings for a description of Florida would naturally be an Atlantic Coast landing in a straight trajectory from a point of European embarkation. So the writers of Florida's official constitution in 1845 seemed strained to find the natural starting point. In fact, what they had written there a century and a half ago sounded wildly off base: "Commencing at the mouth of the River Perdido hence north to Alabama...." The River Perdido? Doesn't Perdido mean "lost?" Doesn't that name of that river suggest that those original constitutional definers didn't know where to start Florida? They started at the intersection with Alabama. But isn't that the tail, rather than the head, of Florida? Wouldn't anyone thinking about Florida just naturally, instinctively begin at its southernmost place? Or wouldn't it start at the historical beginning, St. Augustine? Is it possible for Florida to begin anywhere else? Perhaps at Key West, or perhaps at the mouth of the great north-flowing St. Johns. But the Perdido? The framers of the legal

entity of Florida took as their beginning the most northwesterly spot possible and still be in Florida. Can anyone imagine the New World from any other than an Atlantic Coast first-sighting? Surely anyone familiar with the map of Florida—and isn't everyone?—would start somewhere else.

Surely, virtually anyone familiar with the bird-eye's view of Florida, famous long before satellites made such a picture possible to people as well as to birds, would begin at the most southerly point of the state. And if not there, then, perhaps at the north-eastern corner, the St. Mary's River, dividing the state from Georgia and the rest of the United States, as it was for so long in history. The very proximity of any point on the east coast of Florida to the same Atlantic that brought almost everyone else here, from Ponce de Leon on, would seem to dictate a modern description commencing somewhere on the Atlantic, not the most northwesterly point of the Gulf Coast of Florida. And then to proceed "hence to Alabama"? For centuries, Florida had more in common with Havana than with Alabama, a mean three hundred years nearly to the date after Ponce de Leon came here directly from Cuba, initiating a Spanish run—Havana to St. Augustine—that endured until Andrew Jackson redefined territorial acquisition as the guiding principal of American expansionism.

However much history seems weighted in any other direction, though, starting at the most northwesterly point is exactly how the originators imagined what has become one of the world's most recognizable political shapes, the corporate entity Florida. Leonardo da Vinci sat in his study in Florence beneath a map that showed the appellation "Florida" applied to everything in the New World. Leonardo could see a new world, stretching "from the great cape of Juan Ponce de Leon" northward to Labrador, all of it called "the continent called Florida." If Spanish, rather than English, had obtained as the language of the ultimate conquerors, North America would today be known as Florida. But the drawers of the corporate entity did not belong to an era characterized by the imagination of the likes of Columbus, or Ponce de Leon, or Leonardo. The men of the nineteenth century, alas, were not working with ideas or heroics but with the more basic possibilities of capitalism and nationalism, both of which seemed in almost limitless abundance in earliest Florida.

Maybe the constitutional definers began in Pensacola because the Florida they confronted existed then in only two places, and

they had to choose one or the other. Florida consisted of only two cities, Pensacola and St. Augustine, four hundred miles apart. Nothing recognizably Florida lay in the four hundred fifty miles south of St. Augustine until one arrived at the very end, Key West. If anything existed between, it was known at best by loose renderings of Calusa or Tequesta names and was thus deemed inappropriate to English language maps and descriptions of the proud new corporate entity. Richard Fitzpatrick, South Florida's single representative to the constitutional convention that decided to commence at the Perdido, spoke for all thirty thousand square miles from the Hillsborough River east to the Indian River south to Mallory Docks, an area that today is seventeen counties and ten million people. One wonders how he felt about drawing up the outlines of the state from a Pensacola beginning rather than a Key West starting point. Nevertheless, draw it they did, in constitutional convention at St. Joseph, halfway between Pensacola and St. Augustine. St. Joseph would disappear in a pestilence, but the work done there to define Florida was, even with its Alpha and Omega at Perdido, sufficient to the day. According to Florida's first modern historian, George R. Fairbanks, writing in 1898, "It was by all odds the ablest body of men ever assembled in Florida," before or since, he might conclude today, and "the constitution then formed . . . is in many respects superior to the emendations since made."¹

And so Florida, old in Spanish but as yet young in English, wobbly as a new-born colt, became a political unit ostensibly equal to those states where English had long predominated. Florida entered into union with them on March 3, 1845, with 54,477 inhabitants. Delegates to the constitutional convention sensibly set the governor's salary at a modest \$1,500, the secretary of state's at \$600, members of the legislature at \$3 daily plus mileage on horseback. The real estate value of the entire state was easily exceeded in value by the value of all the slaves in the state. Together, slaves and property came to a grand aggregate of eighty million dollars. The most pressing problem was whether the electorate would go for the argument to make two states of Florida, East and West, both open to slavery, which would have ended the balance of power in the U.S. Senate between free and slave states.

1. George R. Fairbanks, *Florida: Its History and Its Romance* (Jacksonville, Fla., 1904), 226.

Florida is east and west, but not in the way the original framers at St. Joseph meant. They perhaps were motivated to start drawing political Florida in the west because West Florida seemed more English than Spanish. East Florida, centered on St. Augustine, has since time immemorial been, despite intermittent control by the English, a Spanish domain. Beginning in the west continued the tradition throughout most of North America of giving preference to things English.

But the division east and west, Spanish versus English, would not long be the essential division of Florida. Florida is also north and south, rural and urban, just like most political entities, but the ultimate definition, even more easily observable than panhandle versus peninsula, is Gulf versus Atlantic littorals. One imagines starting to define Florida with the Atlantic side, but if for some reason one begins on the Gulf side, one still does not easily imagine Pensacola as the starting point. At one certain spot in Key West, these two points, the Atlantic and the Gulf, are one and the same. Having deliberately bypassed such an obvious starting place, the real reason for the decision of the original definers of Florida has to have been a desire to write up a continuum, a whole, unbroken line, like successfully peeling an orange in one long unbroken peel. So from the mouth of the Perdido, up to Alabama, across to the Atlantic, down to Tortugas, and back up again to the mouth of the Perdido, was their only choice, so as to end at the place of the beginning, as the framers so plaintively wrote it. Thus do I write now, too, as I return to my own place of beginning.

When I am once again resident in Florida, I will draw it to my own satisfaction. The starting point for all my imaginary mean-derings in whatever direction will be the tiny island called Cedar Key, some fifty miles west of where I had my earlier beginning in Florida. I choose Cedar Key not because Lt. Col. Robert E. Lee mailed his wife a letter from there on February 13, 1849, while on a commission from the US army to survey the Florida coast. He commenced his survey, not incidentally, at the St. Mary's in the northeast corner and then went south, then west, in a proper survey of the longest state coast of the lower forty-eight states. He noted in his report to Washington that Cedar Key shipped 2,234 bales of cotton, 2,000 bales of hides and skins the previous year. I choose Cedar Key not for its exports but because from here I look out at the diamonds on the mullet-broken surface of the placid Gulf and realize, more clearly than I have in any other place, that

this is where I can sit and think about what is happening to Florida, and what happens to me now that I am back here. For years I went to the Georgia mountains north of Atlanta to do my thinking about anything really important, but something about the row after row of distant ridges always made me want to go see what was over the next smokey rise rather than sit still to find out what might be lurking in my own imagination. Here at the Gulf's edge, the traffic of fewer people than live in my Atlanta apartment building to distract, I know that I can concentrate on my own idea of Florida.

The map on my wall will be the familiar, indeed, famous panhandle and peninsula, Gulf and Atlantic; my flag will be the long-established if carpetbag-designed red saltier of St. Andrew on a field of white, intersecting at the "Indian female scattering flowers"; my taxes will go to Tallahassee again, rather than to Atlanta. But however real those definitions, the Florida that takes shape once I am in Cedar Key to stay will be one made of memories, both mine and the writers of the Florida that exists today only in books. I will reconstruct a Florida now to suit myself.

The census whereby this Florida of my private imagination will know increase will not be the one taken in ten-years increments by the federal government. It will grow according to the number of volumes I find time to read. Not saving the cream for last, I will begin with the best, the Florida Marjories, and their best work—Rawlings's *Cross Creek* and Douglas's *Florida: The Long Frontier*. From these creators of a Florida of metaphor, I will go on to the early historians—John Lee Williams's *The Territory of Florida*, Bernard Roman's *A Concise Natural History of East and West Florida*—and more modern historians—Kenny, Proctor, Gannon, Jahoda, Tebeau. Florida has big problems, too big to be ignored, made understandable by such volumes as Williams Bradford Huie's *Ruby McCollum*, Anthony Powell's *Gideon's Trumpet*, James McMullen's *Cry of the Panther*, Mark Lane's *Arcadia*, John Rothchild's *Up For Grabs*, Alec Wilkinson's *Big Sugar*, Michael D'Orso's *Like Judgement Day*. Yet Florida is also still Eden, at least in the imagination, and that can easily be recreated in the inestimable work of the early naturalists. Henry Nehrling's *The Plant World in Florida*, Bradford Torrey Simpson's *Florida Wild Life*, Tom Barbour's *That Vanishing Eden*, Allen Andrew's *A Yank Pioneer in Florida*, John C. Gifford's studies, W.S. Blatchley's books, the work of Archie Carr and Jack Rudloe, Howell on birds: all tell the story of natural Florida.

Florida's extraordinary natural beauty is so carefully explored in these volumes as to need no other defense in a rational world.

If such a shelf of books can't redeem Florida from its self, it may prove irredeemable. So I may turn to the tongue-in-cheek humor or early travel books, their Yankee concepts of allure reminding the reader that Florida has always been an object of more hyperbole than hard work to protect its fragile subtropical enticements. Those early Yankee travel books are legion, a library all by themselves: Clifton Johnson's *Highways and Byways of Florida*, Charles Hallock's *Camp Life in Florida*, James Henshall's *Camping and Cruising in Florida*, Charles Ledyard Norton's *A Handbook of Florida*, the *Rambler's Guide to Florida*, George Barbour's *Florida for Tourists, Invalids, and Settlers*, Ledyard Bill's *A Winter in Florida*, J. W. Davidson's *Florida of Today*, Silvia Sunshine's *Petals Plucked from Sunny Climes*, F. R. Swift's *Florida Fancies*, Helen Harcourt's *Home Life in Florida*, Rhodes and Dumont's *A Guide to Florida*, but above all, the ever-complimentary Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Palmetto Leaves*.

More would seem superfluous by now, yet there is another whole library, one consisting of the belles-lettres of Florida. Like Southern literature in general, Florida claims more writers of fiction than poetry. Again the work of the Marjories provides a good beginning. *The Yearling* and *Road to the Sun* tell much of the story, yet there is an embarrassment of riches to come. Kirk Munroe, Edith Pope, Rubylea Hall, Mary Bethell Alfrend, Wyatt Blassingame, Zora Neal Hurston, Patrick Smith, Edwin Granberry, James Branch Cabell, Leon Griffith, Wesley Ford Davis, MacKinlay Kantor, Borden Deal, Andrew Lytle, Theodore Pratt, Harry Crews, Sterling Watson, Peter Matthiessen, Connie May Fowler, Carl Hiaasen, Charles Willeford, Shelley Fraser Mickle, and more round out a reading list that will create a Florida almost the rival of the original, the one first seen by Ponce de Leon among literate men.

I will not risk blurring my vision of the Florida of the imagination with interstates and high-rise beaches. One can find a real enough Florida in an excellent system of state parks. One can still go back to Cross Creek. It is enough for me that I was here to see an Orlando of pleasant neighborhoods nestled around small lakes. I remember when all the traffic on 301, the major thoroughfare right down through the heart of Florida, stopped at red lights that regulated traffic around the Marion County courthouse, right in

the middle of Ocala, just as in any other small town down South. I remember Miccosukkee Road leading northward out of Tallahassee, dark at noonday from interlaced oaks and mosses, the city skyline dominated by the oddly squared old silver dome. I remember Marineland as the premier attraction in the entire state, and far away the most expensive at \$.75 per person over twelve. I remember Marco Island accessible only by boat, home to one old derelict fishing camp. I remember the old un-air-conditioned wooden jook at Salt Springs. In my own private Florida, a place that exists in metaphor and memory, it is all still there.