

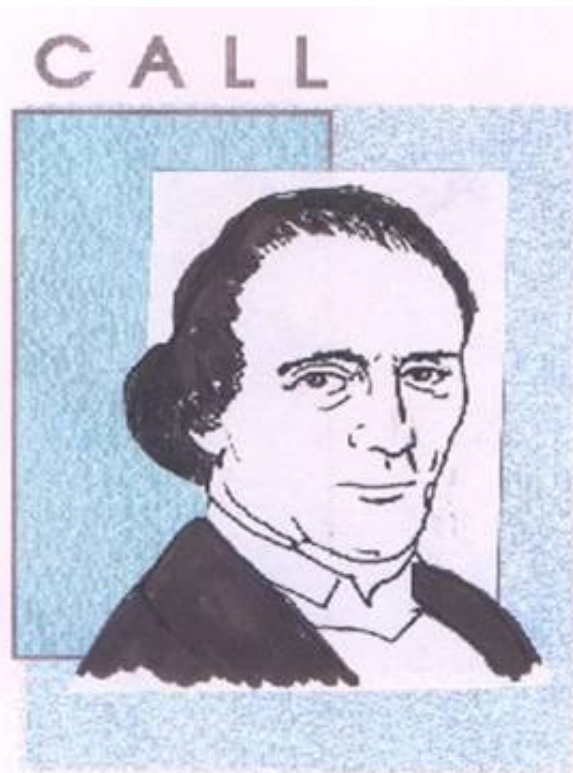
TERRITORIAL FLORIDA 1821-1845

THE STRUGGLE FOR STATEHOOD

THE JACKSON TRANSITION IN TERRITORIAL FLORIDA:

On March 12, 1821, General Andrew Jackson received his commission as military governor of Florida from Secretary of State John Quincy Adams, later Jackson's Presidential rival. Adams entrusted the job of bringing Spanish Florida into the American fold not because he would be a popular choice of the Spanish, of course, but because Jackson knew the region and would attract the confidence of those most likely to settle in the tropical territory. Jackson accepted the appointment with some reluctance, for he suspected his enemies in Washington would relish isolating the popular General in the Florida wilderness. Jackson disliked the almost dictatorial powers he was given to transfer Florida into American hands.

It was not until July that the red and gold banner of Spain was unfurled for the last time in Pensacola as the Governor of West Florida turned over political control to Jackson. The American visitors cheered as Jackson entered the Government House. The General disliked his complicated duties. He had less than one year to settle the hodgepodge of conflicting land claims of British and Spanish titles. He had to oversee the peaceful transfer of Spanish property to the newly arriving American colonists. He had to solve the numerous bi-cultural problems between the two peoples, the least of which was the total distrust the Spanish had of the Tennessean.



The change from Spanish to American rule was not a smooth transition. The Spanish population quickly realized the unruly settlers who visited their homes and establishments had neither the money nor inclination to purchase their property at fair market value. Why buy a house which must be vacated by the end of December? The volatile Mayor of St. Augustine Juan Entralgo

refused to cooperate with Jackson, and when the Spanish Governor Don Jose Callava protested Jackson's policies, Jackson threw him in jail. Few Spaniards elected to remain under American rule. Many elected to strip their homes of anything useful and burnt the foundations so the Americans were left with ruins. Only a number of Minorcan families, who were used to being a minority in Saint Augustine, elected to stay in Florida. Many owned stores and inns which had value.

THE POLITICS OF THE TERRITORY OF FLORIDA.

The new Territory of Florida was second only to Georgia in land area east of the Mississippi River. This huge size, coupled with the state's under populated peninsular, posed serious problems to the state's future development. Northern Congressmen feared that Florida would be divided into two slave states, thus disrupting the delicate balance of having equal slave and free states in the United States Senate. Jackson felt there were more obvious problems: a lack of population, the absence of decent roads and physical resources, and the presence of hostile Seminole Indians.

Territorial Florida had a simple governmental structure. The Governor, a three-year appointee of the President, had to operate with a minimum of Federal funding. The Territorial Council, elected by the people, could only borrow money, issue licenses, and organize a state militia. A political protest in 1838 by one Colonel Charles Downing forced the establishment of a more representative bi-cameral legislature, where voices of rural farmers could be better presented. This reform was offset by the isolation of most homesteads and their lack of political participation.

As the population grew, the legislature began to charter counties with appointed commissioners to handle local civil and criminal cases. The creation of county courts furthered the growth of small towns. By 1824 a Court of Appeals was established in Tallahassee to handle major criminal cases. The process to organize future political units in the territory was formalized.

POLITICAL CONFLICT STARTS IN TERRITORIAL FLORIDA

It was essential to resolve the territory's financial indebtedness so that Florida could construct the transportation and economic ties to the rest of the South. The only forms of state revenue were taxes on land sales, license fees, and poll taxes. In the first decade, almost one-half of the counties in East and West Florida failed to meet their tax return goals. It was in these rural areas where small farmer feared the move to statehood would increase their taxes and bolster the ambitions of large-scale planters.

Two political groups soon developed out of this struggle to finance Florida's development. Jackson had used his position to promote many of his political friends, the most notable being Richard Keith Call. Ironically, these Jacksonian Democrats, benefiting from their location in Middle Florida at the center of the plantation and political, often joined the Whig Party. Florida's Whigs supported increased spending on railroads and state banks, which they deemed essential to the maturation of the Florida economy. East Florida, dominated by small farmers, disliked the willingness of the Whigs to spend public funds on such economic projects.

The anti-Call forces were led by two St. Augustinians - lawyer Robert Raymond Reid and sugar

planter David Yulee Levy. They organized a ferocious attack on Call when the Pensacola Bank, which Call endorsed, collapsed, harming many small West Florida farmers. These Democrats gained the support of frontiersmen with their opposition to the planter aristocracy and appeal to less taxes.



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The election of David Yule Levy, a European Jew, in a traditionalist Protestant wilderness, was an indication of the acceptance of the anti-Call platform. Despite their belief in less spending, both Levy and Reid were staunch supporters of Florida statehood.

THE EARLY DAYS OF PLANTATION FLORIDA

THE FLORIDA OF THE OLD SOUTH. By 1840, Florida had taken its place as a member of the Old South. Its leading citizens, many of neighboring Georgia and Alabama, had formed economic and political ties to all the institutions of Southern society. Florida was an agrarian society and this predominance of agriculture, with its definable class and caste, would leave an notable mark on Florida history.

The plantation leaders led Florida in wealth and political power. There remained in most counties only the urban professionals to challenge this plantation elite and many of them were firmly entrenched in the cotton culture. The townsfolk represented a middle strata of shopkeepers, merchants, artisans, and builders. The small farmer and the stock tender represented the lower economic groups, while the black freedmen and the slave held the least status and power.

By 1825, a region of plantations was developing between the Suwannee and Apalachicola Rivers, the location of the most fertile farmland. Two out of every three African-Americans lived in these five cotton-growing counties of Jackson, Gadsden, Leon, Jefferson, and Madison. It was here that successful Georgia and Carolina planters had started a prosperous farming region with slave labor. The earliest farmers of this planter class produced the DuVals, Calls, Murats, Whites, and Miltons who supplied much of the political leadership of territorial Florida..

THE PLANTATION SYSTEM

. To the traveler of Florida's dirt roads in the 1840's, there was an inescapable universality about this region called Middle Florida. The main house perched on a wooded hill verified the position of self-sufficiency which farm life provided. Overlooking the barns and stables, the slave quarters and tool sheds, the planter determined the operation of his estate much as a medieval lord. While it was not an uncommon fancy for young planters to envision themselves as knights of medieval England, as in the romances of the popular Sir Walter Scott, the reality of rural Florida was a life style that was rather monotonous and difficult.

Like the Middle Ages, plantation life was highly regimented for both the owners and the workers. From the sound of the cow horn at dawn to dismissal call at sunset, both planter and slave had specified tasks to accomplish. Successful procedures were usually copied by other farms until most planters adopted a uniform policy. Thus, while relations between master and slave was often personal and individual to each farm, there was great pressure to practice uniformity in operations and no motivation or incentive to be innovative.

ABSENTEE FARMING. Only in Middle Florida was there a measurable number of absentee farms, most owned by professionals who lived in Tallahassee. On these estates, overseers were entrusted with the day-to-day management of the farm. There were strict rules in maintaining records of all farm activities, from the quality and quantity of crops and livestock, to the health of the workers. It was obvious everything on a plantation had a stated value, which reflected directly upon the treatment of each slave, the future of every animal. Since it was the goal of most overseers to save enough money to start of farm in that vicinity, outright abuses and dishonesty by overseers were infrequently reported.



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Floridians liked to believe that it was impossible for an overseer or owner to rule with the iron hand of a tyrant. There were state statutes for cruelty to slaves. There were, however, few safeguards and plantation justice was so evasive that it existed to the satisfaction of no one. Slaves who were unhappy usually protested quietly by sabotaging plantation activities in some way. There was no place to escape in rural Florida.

In 1854, D. N. Moxley, the overseer of El Destino, a plantation outside Tallahassee, severely punished four slave women for lazy cotton picking. When the girls tried to escape, a brother named Aberdeen slugged Moxley. Aberdeen was arrested for attacking a white man, but one of the girls fled to Tallahassee to her father, who worked for a businessman. A complaint was filed with George Jones, the owner of El Destino. Jones agreed to let the girls return to the plantation without punishment, but Aberdeen was flogged for his violence. Moxley protested that the decision had undermined his authority and retaliated by refusing to let the women visit relatives and friends on nearby farms.

PLANTATION LIVING IN FLORIDA

Two of the best-operated plantations in Florida were owned by the Folsom Brothers, Tom and Bryant of Jefferson County. They were pioneers of the latest farming techniques and outspoken critics of many of the cruel abuses of the overseer system. Cotton was their chief crop, but as was the case in Florida's small farms, corn was raised for livestock and sugar cane was raised along the river. Both Folsoms maintained their own blacksmith shops and smokehouses.

FLORIDA'S COTTON KINGDOM: MIDDLE FLORIDA

The Folsom women presided over all operations in the Main House and adjacent facilities. They directed a staff of maids, cooks, gardeners, and nurses, They directed the sewing of clothing and the construction of household utensils. The older women and children knit cotton and woolen garments. The indigo plant was used to dye cotton blue, while pokeberries (red) and oak bark (brown) were other popular colors. Despite the image of refined wealth, the Folsom women's only manufactured clothes consisted of some formal dresses purchased in Charleston for a fancy ball.



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The Folsom men were identified as kind owners. Unlike others, they allowed plantation children, slave or freeman, the few pleasures of youth. When they weren't fishing, chasing small animals, or picking berries, they were given small tasks such as carrying water into the fields or locating the nests of stray chickens. Hens were discouraged from this act of independence by allowing the kids to roast the eggs. Another memory of children was the long ride back to the barns on the coarse burlap sheets filled with the day's picking. Unfortunately, children were usually terminated from casual activities before their teenage years.

Unlike absentee farms, the Folsom properties were filled with active families, celebrating holidays and birthdays. The two brothers staged contests to see who could run the best Christmas party for the workers. Major holidays were best remembered events in the lives of slaves. There was no work except for those who prepared the food and gifts were distributed in the main house. A supply of hickory wood soap was always kept by the door in case other planters brought slaves with them to the parties. Everyone danced "the pigeon wing" while Bryant Folsom played his fiddle.

The Folsoms operated wedding ceremonies on their plantations despite the nonexistence of lawful slave marriages in Florida. It was the Folsom's religious beliefs that brought them to the conclusion of participating in the common slave practice of "jumping over the broomstick." The Folsoms even

consented to the rather rare practice of intra-plantation marriages, a custom that contradicted the practice in Florida of selling individual slaves regardless of marital status.

SLAVE LIFE IN EARLY FLORIDA

No institution in American history divided our society more than the existence of slavery in the United States. Slavery was a major part of the Florida economy and culture until the Thirteenth Amendment ended the practice. According to the *Black Codes* of the 1828 Florida Constitution, the African-American slave was personal property. He could be put to death for killing a white person, committing arson or rape or insurrection. For lesser offenses, he could be physically nailed to a tree by the ears and given thirty-nine lashes. He was a prisoner to the land he did not own. He had to get permission from his owner to leave the farm to go to church or town. Even a visit with a family member required previous arrangements. Despite the offense, he could not testify in court without the acceptance of his owner.

Only the kindness or economic selfishness of the slave-owner could make any aspect of a slave's existence bearable. Slaves knew that the existence of laws of cruelty were mainly for the protection of slave owners, not the slave victim. A planter working slaves on Sunday would fine the wrath of fundamentalist neighbors more a deterrent than the meager two dollar fine. Unlike the Caribbean and Latin America, slaves were the private property mainly of individuals or partnerships. The Territory of Florida owned no slaves.

Yet, students of Florida history are generally confused by the lack of recorded slave rebellions in the state. They may note that black freedmen selected Florida over living in Alabama or Mississippi. There are probable factors for this situation. Florida's plantations were small and rarely operated by overseers. The entire plantation system was a closed society, with such structure that it was extremely difficult for a slave to escape without detection or for a slave to accumulate weapons and a strategy of vengeance. The free states in the North were far too distance to flee on foot. Only the coastline and the possibility of a Caribbean bound ship presented a possible opportunity for escape.

On the other hand, slaves were trained in the occupation and skills for their owners. Thus, slaves had as diverse a range of skills as the white population. Freedmen engaged in many jobs despite attempts to limit their skills and goals. Freedmen were also still subjected to whippings and fines for abusive language to whites or for associating with slaves without permission. If a freedman was found idle, he could be forced to work.

The system even encouraged freedmen to return to slavery. A particularly tragic story is that of *George Proctor* of the Bahamas, a talented freedman who came to Tallahassee in the 1840's and constructed many of the city's first homes. Excited by the Gold Rush, he mortgaged his family to go to California. When he went broke in the West, his family was sold into slavery in Florida.

On the well-managed plantations, slaves lived in small cabins, heated by fireplaces. After the morning call, there was just enough time to eat breakfast, prepare lunch, and reach the wagons heading into the work fields. Most slaves labored until four o'clock when they were released to tend their own vegetable gardens and chickens around the cabins. There was little privacy or free time, and the evening meal was the only time a family was together. Florida farms were smaller than those in neighboring states which meant specialized occupations like blacksmiths and maids were

less common on Florida properties than elsewhere in the South. It was not uncommon, however, to see slaves hired out to work in town construction or public roads. Only the most skilled slave could find a way to buy his freedom. Many of the slaves who gained their freedom was due to the retirement of their long time owners.

Slavery offered little but the security of a place to live and a job. Slaves could not be fired so aging slaves spent their remaining days doing odd chores. The health of a slave was important when they were young and strong, but medical help dwindled as a slave became less valuable. Planters tended to be more sympathetic to slaves than small farmers and town workers, who viewed slaves as economic competitors. Another element that is often neglected by historical research is the large percentage of slaves who gained skilled knowledge on smaller farms. When the Civil War started, slaves took over the operations of both farm and town across Florida.

SLAVERY: THE INSTITUTION THAT DIVIDED AMERICA

As significant as the attitudes and beliefs fostered by by slavery as a social system was the systematic destruction of the slaves' African heritage. Perhaps no where else in the Americas was slavery practiced in such a decentralized and capitalistic and individualistic manner to terminate most remnants of the black man's origins. Slaves were not allowed to maintain any identifiable African customs, nor speak any African words, nor practice any African faiths. In Florida slaves were mixed without consideration to African tribal culture. Only the common heritage of bondage brought together the African-American after several generations of slavery in the United States.

Slaves were sold either as individuals or family units, with no restrictions applied at the marketplace except the beliefs of the seller. Slave mothers raised children until they were old enough to work the fields as waterboys or helpers, although communal child-rearing did exist in some farms. Fortunately for the slave, Florida's small farm unit often preserved the slave family unit more than large plantations. Living conditions, however, were very basic on small farms, but often everyone had the same diet: salt pork, corn bread, locally grown greens, corn coffee, and cane molasses. Southern diets were high in starch and empty calories.

Education was simply limited to the whims of the master, who sometimes encouraged learning how to read the Bible. The Church was the only acceptable institution where the African-American discovered unity, solace, and identity. In large towns slaves and freedmen sat in the back galleries of the church, but in rural areas, like West Florida, black preachers were allowed to visit slave quarters to conduct services. Baptisms and singing were the most popular aspects of Southern spiritualism.

Florida's slaves had some distinct feelings about escape. The North was distant, but the Florida coast was never more than ninety miles away, and stories of escape to Cuba and the Bahamas where slavery had been abolished were common. The southern half of Florida was a wilderness inhabited by the Seminole Indians. Southern planters feared these avenues of escape and established a network of patrollers around the state. These hired poor whites, with their hunting dogs and horses, were always prepared to chase down a fugitive slave for profit. Planters consider trying to escape a natural thing; patrollers considered it a business.

LIFE IN NON-PLANTATION FLORIDA

THE FLORIDA CRACKER Florida was the least populated Southern state in the least populated region of the country. The Florida peninsular swallowed up the early settlers and the sandy soil was not conducive in most areas to successful plantation life. The small farmer adapted to the tropical summer heat. Many of the early pioneers were Scots-Irish and non-Anglican English from Georgia and Alabama, who found the inexpensive lands outside Middle Florida ideal for a new life. The rich soils of the Tallahassee Hills was the only Florida region conducive to the large-scale plantation economy found in the Tidewater of the Carolinas.



The Florida *Crackers* gained their name either from the sound of their whips, driving mule and oxen teams, or by their hard meal biscuits they ate by the ton. Unlike the town folk, the crackers were predominately Baptist or Methodists, often worshipping in homes or outdoors until they were numerous enough to construct a chapel. Above all, they were individualists who believed a closely knit household and hard labor could conquer any obstacle.

Their hope for eternal salvation and a decent crop were tempered by their realistic outlook to the unyielding demands of frontier life. Every hour meant making decisions that could effect the success of the household. It was this freedom to control their destiny rather than their possibility of becoming a rich planter that was the source of personal pride. The farmer felt he was the equal of any other farmer. If the farmer did not participate in Territorial politics, he had a firm belief in representative institutions.

CRACKER LIFE IN EARLY FLORIDA

The small farmer feared the arrival of planters and investors and Northern speculators. He knew the arrival of these groups signaled the end of their independence and political control. Even by 1850, there was still space in East Florida and West Florida, for a homesteader to escape the proximity of neighbors. If the initial farm was successful, the log cabin was usually replaced with a two-storied frame house of split-sided logs and a big front verandah. In the backyard was the familiar tool shed and barns. Around the sides were the vegetable gardens, chicken coops, and hog pens.

The frontier farmer was poor, but quite proud of his subsisting way of life. His menu came from the crops and livestock of his labor, supplemented only by a weekend outing to town or a fishing trip to a lake or the shore. Meals were generally cooked in skillets on scaffolded stoves of pine logs, usually located in a kitchen separated from the house by an open breezeway. Hog grease was used as both a soap and cooking oil.

The monthly trip to market produced any other need belongings. Before the suppression of the

Seminoles, it was not usual for homesteaders to form a convoy of wagons to market. It protected the families, provided companionship, and solved wagon breakdowns in the sandy roads. A trip to the county seat was the main source of entertainment and banjo and fiddle music filled the air around the marketplace.

Community efforts like house-raising, logrollings, woods burning for open pasture, and corn chucking were both social events and economic necessities. Any family in need found many volunteers and travelers could be assured of a place to stay if a storm curtailed travel.

Next to the rifle and the ax, the Bible represented the Cracker way of life. Religion always preceded the arrival of a circuit riding preacher or the construction of a church. A typical religious trail-brazer was Georgia-born Methodist pastor Isaac Boring, who received the Alachua circuit in 1828. Every three weeks, Boring rode his horse from St. Augustine to Jacksonville and then cross the Alachua prairies after a boat ride down the St. Johns River. Despite the danger of Indian attack, he never took the Bellamy Road, because he anted to reach isolated farmers. Circuit riding required a crusading spirit and a strong will, but by 1846, thirty-two Methodist preachers were circuiting the entire populated state.

Once the rural church was built, it became the focal point of Cracker activities. Even with a building, many groups were so small and so poor, they relied upon circuit riders. By 1845, the majority religion was the Baptist faith, bolstered by its simplistic, associational form of origination and its voluntary ministry. The Methodists easily ranked second.

THE CRACKER VIEW IN FLORIDA

The mind of these Southern yeoman, who made up the majority of Florida's white population, was rarely captured in publications and personal records. Their tribute was their hard labor and accomplishments, but various wills and occasional letters reveal their awareness of political and economic conditions in Florida. It is not surprising that the Cracker questioned the dominance of the planter aristocracy in state politics and the lack of public facilities for the small farmer. Yet, the farmer remained a staunch supporter of most Southern institutions including slavery.

Contemporary publications about the Florida Cracker tend to picture the humorous aspects of simple rural life and their acceptance of such inexpensive pastimes as cockfights behind the barn, weekend fishing trips, and courtship in the country. Literature was mostly compiled by city dwellers and planters so it is not surprising that small farmers were viewed as contented, ignorant, and provincial. The farmers' pride, endurance, and stability was rarely described for Northern readers. The small farmers survived the Civil War and rebuilt the South long after the strength of the plantation society collapsed.
