



YBOR CITY, TAMPA, STREET SCENE AT THE TURN OF THE CENTURY. COURTESY OF STATE OF FLORIDA ARCHIVES (N043700).

## A PERSONAL REFLECTION

*Florida: The Last 500 Years, the Next Millennium*

BY MIGUEL A. BRETOS

It rained very hard that hot summer day that I arrived in Miami. It was August of 1961, and I was a teenage Cuban refugee then, a stranger in a strange land. That week, someone had hijacked a plane full of passengers and forced the pilot to fly them to Cuba—a novelty then, soon to become commonplace. I was, and painfully felt myself to be, an exile. I did not expect to remain one for long, however. Surely, we were all going back home. That was before the missile crisis of 1962 when, for a tense few days, Florida folks had night-

mares of atomic mushrooms against the deep blue sky. Little did I suspect that weeks would stretch into months, years and decades.

During those days, it was my good fortune to live for a while in the Tampa area. One day I was walking through the streets of Ybor City when stories I had heard in my childhood in Cuba came suddenly alive. They were stories about my great-grandmother America del Pino's own exile in Tampa in the 1890s, and about my grandfather coming of age in Florida at the turn of the century. And there they

were: the Cuban Club, the Pasaje Hotel, the Asturian Center, the Martinez Ybor factory, Sanchez y Haya, the Del Pinos. I remember touching with reverential awe the railing at the entrance of the factory where Jose Martí, the Cuban hero, had spoken to Tampa cigar workers in 1891. It was the beginning of my lifelong conversation with Florida history.

As far as these things can be precisely dated, my own personal epiphany was made possible by that figurative railing with which I connected with Florida history, not as a stranger's, but as my own. Florida has many such railings. The history of Florida may not have been one of inclusion all the time. Indeed, for many Floridians it may have a tragic resonance, for who can brush aside the extinction of the original Floridians, the martyrdom of Osceola, the Rosewood massacre, where seventeen black Floridians fell victims to racist violence in 1923, or the forced labor imposed on blacks by the turpentine industry? On the other hand, the history of Florida has been consistently one of diversity. That diversity may not always be obvious but the lessons of diversity in Florida's past should help us secure it for her future.

But there is a problem in that Floridians on the whole tend to be complacent about the state's history. Despite graceful and literate scholarship from authors such as Michael Gannon and the late Charlton Tebeau, the subject is not popular. Perhaps the reason is that so many of today's Floridians have come from somewhere else and have yet to develop an active curiosity about the place where they live. Quite possibly, Florida's past is so fragmented as to make the whole incomprehensible.

Florida history has aspects that are exemplary, and facets that are eerily prophetic. Florida was the site of the first Catholic, the first Protestant, and the first Orthodox service in what is now the United States. I take that to mean that we Floridians ought to make a special effort to get along with one another. Ponce de Leon's alleged search for the magic Fountain of Youth was but a preview of what folks have sought in the Florida of later ages. Jules Verne's choice of Florida's East Coast as the place for the launching of the lunar vehicle in his novel *From the Earth to the Moon* is also in that category. Maybe he knew something we do not, but his selec-

tion of the site where such an improbable thing would actually take place a hundred years later is, to say the least, a remarkable feat of prescience. Maybe Florida is indeed a magic place where one needs to accept that the fantastic can happen. Millions of visitors expect no less from Mickey Mouse's Magic Kingdom.

There are many Floridas in the historical sequence, seemingly substituting rather than complimenting each other. There is a prehistoric Florida, now vanished as a living human reality. There is a Spanish Florida in two periods, with a British interlude of twenty years in between. Then commenced the American Florida that has been in business far less than its Spanish colonial antecedent. Florida, in fact, has reinvented itself from scratch many times. Florida the southern American state was an invention of the nineteenth century, just as the Florida of beaches and sunshine was essentially a creation of the twentieth. How will the state reinvent itself—the multicultural, international Florida of the future—as we enter the new millennium? What grand opportunities lie therein!

Florida is a state of surprises and constant discoveries. As natural landscapes go, there is nothing in Florida to match the grandeur of Yosemite, the Grand Canyon or the glaciers of Alaska. Boredom, in fact, seems to be the existential condition of driving the length of the Florida Turnpike, Alligator Alley, or the seemingly endless stretch of US 27 south of Lake Okeechobee. But stay alert. What we lack in drama we more than make up for in subtlety. Florida is always more than meets the eye.

Consider that the flat Everglades landscape is profoundly sensitive to altitude. Gradients of inches account for remarkable variations in the ecosystem of hammocks, the wooded islands that break the grassy expanse. The Everglades, of course, is not strictly "land," nor is it your standard-issue swamp; it is a vast, shallow, slowly-moving "river of grass" as Marjory Stoneman Douglas explains in her landmark book.

Reaching south from the North American mainland, Florida is a connector between the two halves of the New World tradition. It is a place where new and exciting Caribbean strands weave into an already exciting cultural tapestry. Given Florida's geographic location, one of the ironies of

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Columbus' voyages was that he never sighted Florida, though he came mighty close. Had the awestruck Lucayans he encountered in the Bahamas pointed him west to Florida instead of south to Cuba, the history of the New World may well have been different.

Florida history, like the landscape, has a strange, paradoxical quality. From a thinly populated southern state, Florida has vaulted to fourth in the nation with almost fourteen million inhabitants. A powerful, diverse economy at the crossroads of the Americas has turned it into a hub of global trade. But that is only part of the story. Florida's population and economic growth have run in tandem with one of the largest migrations in American history.

This migration includes the Haitian people bravely sailing towards the American Dream and the Montreal couple driving down for their vacation—*Quebec: Je Me Souviens* tags are a common sight on the road.

Snowbirds have come in from the cold, searching for their slice of Florida sunshine or a warmly comfortable setting for their retirement years. Immigrants and refugees have come from beyond the seas, mostly from Latin America and the Caribbean, in pursuit of economic opportunity and personal freedom. This human flood has filled the suburban belts of mushrooming cities like Orlando, Tampa, Jacksonville and the heavily urbanized corridor between Miami and Palm Beach. The lower west coast, from Naples-Fort Myers to Bradenton-Sarasota has grown beyond belief.

Sometimes Florida's story lies buried. To outward appearances, Tallahassee is quintessentially southern. The original domed state capitol building was the visual and civic center of the town until it was dwarfed by its skyscraper successor. Surrounded by moss-draped oaks, the Capitol complex sits on an urban grid with streets bearing names like Monroe, Jefferson and Duval. A stone's throw away, St. John's Episcopal parish church, founded in 1834, proclaims its ancient local pedigree as the first Episcopal Church in the New World. A few miles from the city is Olustee, where twelve Yankee regiments under Seymour and five thousand Confederate troops under Finnegan slugged it out amidst the scrub palmettos one February day in 1864. The Confederates carried the day.

But there is more to Tallahassee than meets the eye. When the Florida Territory needed a capital in 1824, the Spanish settlements of St. Augustine and Pensacola were passed over, and for good reason. Both were impracticably located, far from each other and from everything else. And, one suspects, too invested in the Spanish past to be of much use to an emerging American state. The territorial legislature therefore determined that a brand-new city should be settled inland on a suitable site in the Florida panhandle. They located a lovely spot not far from the mouth of the St. Mark's River, roughly halfway between the Gulf coast and Georgia, and between St. Augustine and Pensacola. Since most of Florida south of the panhandle was as yet unsettled, that was as central as you could get. And so, Tallahassee was born, a new city for a new age.

In 1987, while digging the foundations for an office building near the city center, workers came across unusual material in the ground: bits of iron, beads, ceramic shards and remains of animal bones. Calvin Jones, the state archaeologist, was called to the site. He was intrigued by what seemed to be the remains of a Spanish colonial mission. A closer analysis revealed a far more exciting picture. The bits and pieces of iron were the remains of chain mail, a medieval defensive garment unseen in Florida since the 16th century. (Contrary to romantic depictions of Spanish conquistadors in armor riding through swamps and deserts, the Spanish soon discovered that armor exhausted the wearer in the tropical heat in exchange for very little protection.) The beads and ceramic remains were also of very early date. Could this be the long-sought encampment where Hernando de Soto had rested his troops during the winter of 1539–40?

Analysis of the bones settled the issue. They belonged to pigs, quite possibly the remains of a pork meal from herds known to have been brought to Florida by De Soto. This had to be the old campsite, but there was more. Contemporary records left no doubt that De Soto had chosen to set up camp in the capital of the large and prosperous Apalachee kingdom Anhayca. These archaeological findings were further and conclusive evidence of the location of the Native American settlement. Tallahassee was not the first and only capital on the site—it was home to

*La Ville, le Château et le Village de St AUGUSTIN,  
en Amérique.*



LA VILLE, le Château et le Village de St. Augustin, en Amérique. Pierre Vander Aa, ca.1715 (after Arnoldus Mondavus). JAY I. KISLAK FOUNDATION, INC. 93.14.0.1.

earlier spirits. Although there is nothing to mark it, visitors to Tallahassee today can find the site of Anhayca and the De Soto camp easily. It is about a mile from the state Capitol, two blocks off Highway 27, the appropriately named Apalachee Parkway.

Tallahassee's importance in the Native American scheme of things helped determine the location of the largest Spanish Christian mission in the Florida panhandle. San Luis de Apalachee, now being reconstructed, was also built within the state capital's limits. San Luis was the *cabecera*, the "head religious mission" for the entire panhandle region. When the Florida Franciscan province was at its apogee during the 17th century, this was the administrative and spiritual center of a vast region, connected overland to St. Augustine and by sea to the Caribbean through the port of St. Mark's. The mission was home to 2,000 souls before the English and their Creek allies destroyed it in the early 18th century. Florida missions, unlike some in the American Southwest, were not made of stone. What little remained was soon overgrown.

The mission complex at San Luis de Apalachee has been thoroughly excavated. Research has revealed an amazing assemblage of indigenous and European structures. Franciscan church and native council eyed each other uneasily across a vast clear space that served as mission plaza and playing field. They were both made of daub and wattle with thatched roofs but there the similarity ended. The church was European in form and certainly in purpose. Not so the council house, a massive rounded building that was native in spirit and design. The ritual native ball game was played in the dusty square well into the 1600's, a remarkable cultural accommodation despite the fulmination of zealous friars.

There is a moral in Tallahassee's layered history, the strata of Florida's past that lie below the moss-draped oaks and classical porticoes. This ancient, historically complex capital site is far more interesting—and far more welcoming—to the multi-hued population of a culturally diverse state. What historians and archaeologists have revealed about our state capital is important for our future, for it reconnects an important symbol of

Florida statehood to a past all Floridians ought to share and cherish.

Given Columbus' unfortunate choice of names, it is probably for the best that he did not make it to Florida after all. He named Cuba "Juana" in honor of the Castilian princess later known as Juana *la Loca*, "the Mad." We can be grateful to Ponce de Leon for his choice of a name. "Florida" is one of the state's main intangible assets, suggestive as it is of flowers, Easter and happy things: a grand name for a place where people are supposed to feel good.

Florida is where U.S. history as a chapter in the diaspora of Old World peoples began. The first lines of the story were written, of course, in Spanish. In a decade and a half it will have been five hundred years since Ponce de Leon's landfall. Birds were nesting on the trees from which the Mayflower timbers came when Pedro Menéndez de Avilés founded St. Augustine in 1565, four decades before Jamestown and half a century before Plymouth Rock. St. Augustine was the first permanent European settlement in what was to become the United States. Florida's primacy is as unquestionable as it is often unappreciated.

In 1562, Rene de la Laudonnière settled Fort Caroline near present-day Jacksonville as a refuge for persecuted Huguenots. The French colonists were either massacred or expelled by the Spanish. However, their short-lived venture turned out to be an unexpected success from the perspective of remote posterity. It bought a chapter for the French in every Florida history book, and a stand for the fleur-de-lis in the state's "Five Flags Over Florida" displays, of which the most important is at the State Capitol Rotunda in Tallahassee. But there is more. Fort Caroline enjoys the distinction of being the first location in the United States where God was worshipped in a Protestant service. It would be difficult to imagine a more enriching precedent.

When Charles III of Spain ceded Florida to the British in 1763, Spaniards removed most of the colony's economically active population, including the government administrators, the clergy, and church and government archives. British Florida (1763–1784) had to be built almost from the ground up. The new colonial masters found that they had not only to occupy the territory, they had to repopulate it as well, often with immigrants as improbable



TWO OF HENRY FLAGLER'S NEWEST CREATIONS: A STEAM-POWERED TRAIN AND THE ROYAL POINCIANA HOTEL, PALM BEACH, CA. 1900. COURTESY OF STATE OF FLORIDA ARCHIVES (N036611).

as Minorcans and Greeks. (Because of that, Florida has the singular honor of being the cradle of the Greek Orthodox Community in the Americas.)

The Seminoles and Miccosukees came to Florida as exiles and made it a home. In that, they were trendsetters of sorts—the first of many permanent population streams that came to Florida primarily for the freedom and security that it offered. This is the essential experience of Haitian boat people, Cuban and Nicaraguan exiles, European Jews and the Central American Mayas that have settled in, of all places, Indiantown. Florida as a haven is an old tradition.

In the 18th century, African slaves from Georgia and the Carolinas escaped to Spanish Florida. They came in pursuit of freedom and, hopefully, a place in the colonial militia. The Spanish monarch guaranteed freedom to them. This was not the result of any humanitarian impulse but a shrewd economic strategy, for the manpower shortage in the ever-

vulnerable Spanish colony was always keen. In the process, however, fascinating history was made. As modern scholars have shown, the former slave settlement at *Fuerte de Gracia Real de Santa Teresa de Mose*—“Fort Mose” for short—was the first African free town in North America. As a fitting backdrop for the heroic struggles for civil rights in the Florida of the 1960s, it is a story that deserves to be better known.

Florida became an American territory in 1821 and a state in 1845. The opening of the Florida frontier to American settlement cleared the way for yet another of the state’s fundamental demographic and cultural streams: the Florida Crackers. Folks of Anglo-Celtic stock and culture had begun drifting into Florida from Georgia and the Carolinas since the English period (1763–1784). The American acquisition of the territory, however, quickened the pace of migration. It was not so much a flood as a steady flow of people heading south with their



“COWBOY CRACKER” AT ROUNDUP NEAR FT. MCCOY, FLORIDA, CA. 1910. COURTESY OF STATE OF FLORIDA ARCHIVES (N045020).

wagons and their cattle, their English language and their southern cultural traditions.

The origin of the term “cracker” is the subject of ongoing debate. To some, it is a derivation of the early settlers’ “crackin’ the corn” in order to make grits or, more likely, “crackin’ the whip” while herding cattle. Crackers created more than they brought. Being poor, they brought relatively few slaves, for they were unlikely to own any. They were not so much into building a new version of the southern plantation system as in making a living in the rough, wild Florida frontier. Theirs was a self-reliant, hardscrabble lot that had more in common with western cowboys than southern planters.

Just as there are great discontinuities in Florida history, there are also important constants. Sand, surf, sunshine and wilderness have been always there: the coordinates of the Florida imaginary. To earlier generations they have signified the essential and often difficult Florida. However, as the nineteenth century closed, winter-weary northerners

began to discover the wonders of the Florida weather. Railroad magnates Henry Flagler and Henry Plant went a long way towards repackaging the state as America’s tropical paradise. They wanted passengers to ride their trains to nowhere, guests to stay at their Florida hotels, and buyers for their real estate schemes. The forces they helped unleash would change Florida beyond recognition.

A hundred years later sunshine is Florida’s star attraction, every Floridian’s birthright. Solar radiation bouncing off all that sand makes up for a lot of heat. Not surprisingly, it was a Florida physician, Dr. John Gorrie, who invented the first practical ice-making machine in the nineteenth century. Like many Floridians before or since, Dr. Gorrie came from somewhere else, in his case Charleston, South Carolina. By the time of his death in 1855, he was thoroughly assimilated to Florida. His last will was to rest near the sea in his adoptive Apalachicola, a touchingly romantic gesture. A grateful Florida has enshrined his memory in

marble in the U.S. Capitol. Ironically, Dr. Gorrie was interested in the therapeutic value of ice in the treatment of fever. The application of his discoveries to refrigeration and, eventually, air conditioning lay in the future. It was up to Willis Carrier, truly a benefactor of mankind, to take the edge off a Florida August with his air-conditioning apparatus.

Gone are the days when salvage hunters combed Florida beaches, picking the remains of vessels lost in the wild surf and coastal reefs. Believe it or not, some folks in Florida made a living that way not so long ago. The late Mel Fisher, though wildly successful, was a reiteration of an old Florida theme. Fisher's dramatic discovery of the wreck of the *Atocha* in 1985, however, rekindled popular interest in Florida sunken treasure. Interest in the recreational possibilities of the sea and the seashore has never flagged, at least during the twentieth century. Today sand and surf determine the value of prime real estate, the dream of many and the possession of relatively few.

Once a wilderness fraught with danger, Florida's wetlands have gained cachet as precious natural environments. Perhaps no state in the nation has suffered the ecological indignities of Florida. Possibly because of the flatness and apparent sameness of the state's natural regions, we have felt it was our God-given right to dam, canalize, desiccate, deforest and otherwise exploit our natural resources without as much as a second thought. Ill-conceived acclimatization and accidental introductions have wreaked havoc in Florida, from the infamous melaleuca tree, once seeded from airplanes over the Everglades and now virtually ineradicable, to the *Victoria regia*, a Brazilian waterlily that came in as an ornamental and ended up clogging Florida's canals. Not to mention nasties like the Brazilian pepper, a toxic weed, *Buffo marino*, the poisonous toad, or the redoubtable walking catfish. Fortunately, it seems that some important lessons have been learned and a new mentality is emerging, especially among young people. Perhaps because the Florida landscape is hardly as dramatic as the ancient redwood forests or Yosemite National Park, we tend not to value it as much—and we must.

What used to be the southernmost of the mainland states has now become, once again, the northernmost outreach of Latin America and the

West Indies. Connections that were broken generations ago have been re-established with a vengeance. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the case of one of the state's newest—and, ironically, oldest—population streams, the Cubans. During the Spanish period, Florida functioned as a dependency of Cuba in both the civil and ecclesiastic jurisdictions. Several Florida governors were native Cubans, while others had close ties to Cuban society. Cuban émigrés helped build the cigar industry of Key West and Tampa during the late nineteenth century. When hundreds of thousands of Cubans came to Florida as exiles beginning in the 1960s, they came to a place their forebears knew well. Many Cuban-Floridians today can point with pride to ancestral connections in St. Augustine, Key West or Tampa.

Florida's integration with Latin America and the Caribbean in the course of the last couple of generations has been amazing. Venezuelans, Colombians, Hondurans, Nicaraguans, Dominicans, Jamaicans, Arubans, Yucatecans and Bajans from Barbados all look to Miami as their gateway to the United States. Miami neighborhoods, now in their second and third generations of Latino occupation and transformation. Miami's Little Havana has now become Little Managua and is rapidly evolving into a pan-Latino neighborhood. This is happening not only in Miami, of course. What used to be a South Florida phenomenon has become generalized to the state as a whole.

Nowhere in America does the term "Afro—" convey deeper cultural nuances than in Florida. There are Afro-Floridians whose ancestors or who themselves have come from Alabama or Mississippi, from Martinique, Cuba, Jamaica, the Bahamas, Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Belize, the Virgin Islands, Colombia or Nigeria. In Florida they joined the native stream of African-American culture that had produced the likes of James Weldon Johnson, Zora Neale Hurston, and Mary McLeod Bethune. All have dark skins, but beware of generalizations. They speak English (with American or West Indian intonations), Spanish, French, Creole, Garifuna and Yoruba. They pray to Allah, Yahweh or the holy *Orishas*. Their world views are as diverse as cricket and football.



BAHAMIANS IN COCONUT GROVE, 1890S. HISTORICAL MUSEUM OF SOUTHERN FLORIDA, RALPH MUNROE COLLECTION.

Human and cultural diversity, of course, is not unique to Florida. In this sense, Florida is a microcosm of America. What makes Florida distinctive, however, is the presence of such amazing diversity at a given time, within a specific geopolitical and environmental setting, and as a consequence of a remarkable history. Growth and the rate of change have been exciting but have a troubling underside. From a vast area of small towns and medium-size cities, Florida has become a victim of urban sprawl through massive immigration, urbanization and sub-urbanization. It is an experience at once exhilarating and frightening.

One of modern Florida's pressing challenges is to develop a sense of community. Many Floridians have a sense of being here but not a sense of belonging. To the extent that Florida has been built by people of many different languages and cultures over centuries of history, Florida belongs to all. No single group has a lock on Florida's past, and no one should have it on Florida's future. How and where we take it from here is everyone's responsibility.

As Floridians, we are lucky. We live in a beautiful place that also happens to be one of the most dynamic communities in the world, where the future is taking shape literally before our eyes. The next millennium? It is here already. Let us assume the legacy of a past where we are all present and the ownership that it confers, for in a community where no one takes ownership, no one would want to take responsibility. With a bit of luck, we may well invent the best of Floridas for the new millennium.

**Miguel A. Bretos**, *specialist in Latino history, is counselor to the secretary for community affairs and special projects at the Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC. He is former director of the Cuban History and Archives Project, Miami, and former Distinguished Professor at William Paterson College of New Jersey. Dr. Bretos also has served on the faculty of Miami-Dade Community College; the University of New South Wales, Sydney Australia; and Oberlin College. He is the author of two books about the colonial architecture of the Yucatan Peninsula and numerous scholarly and popular articles.*