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Pre-Flagler Influences on the Lower Florida East Coast

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Mr. Merrick, President of the Historical Association of Southern Florida, founder of the City of Coral Gables, and one of the founders of the University of Miami, is a man who has devoted most of his life to the development of Southern Florida. The following paper, read at the autumn meeting of the Association, contains the authentic observations of a man who has lived history, and who knows and loves the subject on which he writes.

ROMANTIC as the early history of the Spanish occupation of Southern Florida is, the important history of the region began with the actual use of the country. The Spanish did not really use their Florida lands; the actual use of this section and its really valuable history, from our modern standpoint, began with the home finders, the home builders—those who came to use the country for homes. Thus I begin with the West Indian influences, with the Conch colonization on the lower East coast of Florida.

These Conchs began to come into the lower Peninsula in the early 1800's, and continued this occupation throughout the century, until their influence reached its peak from 1870 to 1890. The colonization reached from Key West to Lake Worth, the farthest point north of their occupation. These Conchs, as they were and as their descendants still are called, were descendants from American-British Torys who left the coastal parts of the thirteen colonies toward the end of the 1700's and who went to the Bahamas; were given grants there by King George III; and became a sea living, sea-using, sea knowing people.

At that time our region, the Florida keys, and the whole lower East Coast of Florida was in all essence a part of the Bahamas—almost wholly West Indian. As these descendants of the English Torys spread through-

out the Bahaman Archipelago, covering over six hundred miles, and coming to within fifty miles of our Florida keys, they spread naturally to the Florida keys and on, "up along" (as their saying goes) the shores of Biscayne Bay, and "up along" to Lake Worth.

If you go today to Andros Island, one of our nearest Bahaman Islands, its eastern shore will present a true picture of about what the lower East Coast of Florida was throughout the 1800's and indeed right down into the 1890's. On the shore of Andros Island today there are little villages along the beach. There is no back country, and no roads—only paths through the bush and the pines. All their living, their work, and their using is along the beach, and the sea. And that was true also of our entire lower East Coast throughout the 1800's right down into the nineties: beach living, and no back country. Nearly all of the hundreds of islands of the Bahamas are that way today; the inhabitants still live right along the beach, and are still chiefly sea-using.

These West Indian Conchs, descendants of the American-English Torys, brought to the lower East Coast country the West Indian customs and the West Indian fruits which were to have a lasting influence upon our mainland, planting around their houses many, many fruits that now are not so common with us, but which then were common with them, and from which much of their sustenance came. They brought their peculiarly West Indian vegetables: yams, casava, eddys, pounders, and benni. They brought their architecture, which was West Indian in all essence and adaptation: a mixture of West Indian ideas, and of Spanish and English. The architecture today at Governor's Harbor on Eleuthera Island, at Spanish Wells, and other old out-island settlements today, and of the older Key settlements, and of the oldest settlements on Biscayne Bay, was built by sea people. It reminds one of Nantucket and of Gloucester. Sea-faring English architecture! But there were in them smackings of Spanish also, manifested in the prevalent use of pinks and blues; and in the still common use of jalousies and of interior courts.

There is, too, a mixture of the Spanish and old English in their speech today, down the keys and among the Conch descendants, such as the English use of the *h*'s and the English use of the *v*'s—the transposition of the *v*'s to *w*'s. For instance *vine* becomes *wine*. And *Duval* street is *Duwal*! The Castilian use of *z*, as when we say *Brazilian*, is with them *Brasilian*. The Anglo-Saxon *roses* becomes *rosses*, and the Anglo-Saxon *Tuesday* becomes *Toosday*. And so on.

The West Indian-like villages of the earlier Key settlements, looking then just as the Bahaman towns of today; such as those of Governor's

Harbor and Spanish Wells and all of the present day out-island towns of the Bahamas, sprang up along the Hawks Channel, along the Keys, in the middle of the 1800's and after. These villages reached up as far as Tavernier and Planter on Key Largo, "The Hole" on upper Matecumbe. Indian Key was a Port of Entry at this time. Then there was Cooconut Grove, (with the "a" in it then) and old Cutler, Lemon City, on Biscayne Bay. Along the ocean shore, "up along" north of Biscayne Bay, there were the Houses of Refuge which, before the days of the lighthouses, were built along the lower East Coast and right up around Canaveral to St. Augustine. From about 1860 continuing through the 90's, the Government had these Houses of Refuge, each twenty to thirty miles apart, along this whole East Coast shore which then—on the land—was as unfrequented as was the West Coast of Africa, or as the East shore of Andros Island is today. Most of these Houses of Refuge were manned by Conchs. These later were, and are, lighthouses!

At that time Key West was the capital of the island towns, and of the Biscayne shore settlements, just as Nassau is the capital of the Bahaman out-islands today. Hawk's Channel, the inside protected channel, behind the two hundred mile Outer Reef, was the great highway down which came the sailing packets, such as "The Island Home"; connecting the Biscayne Bay settlements, all of the intervening keys, and all of their West Indian-like villages with Key West, their West Indian-like capital. All commercial interests, special life, the connections with the outside world and nation, centered at Key West!

Wrecking, before the day of the establishment of the lower East Coast lighthouses in the 60's and 70's, was an accepted industry. Salvage from the wrecks of ships along the reef from Lake Worth to Key West supplemented much of the needs of the people. Much of the material from which their West Indian type houses were built, and even of the Houses of Refuge, came from such salvage. Flour, sewing machines, organs, all kinds of furniture, baby cribs, wine; all came from the sea! The Cape Florida lighthouse, built of ancient English brick which still stands on Biscayne Key, was long called the Spanish Light—indeed the only lighthouse going back nearly to the days of the Spanish occupation. This light was not transferred to the present Fowey Rock lighthouse until 1878. And so it was of comparatively recent time that the wrecking industry began to fade out. Now sponging had become a great industry. Key West then became a world sponge market.

Expansive planting of coconuts and of all of these many West Indian fruits around the homes was customary. There are coconut groves on the

lower keys that are over a hundred years old. The first commercial plantings of that Conch civilization, in a large way, was when the virgin mahogany and dogwood forests of Key Largo and Elliott's Key gave place to great fields of pineapples—delicious, huge juicy fruits of finest flavor—Porto Rico, Abbakka, Queens, Sugar Loaf, and other varieties almost extinct now! Carried on the heads of Bahaman negroes from the nearby fields to the beach, these were loaded on sloops and were sailed directly to Baltimore, New York, and Boston. Conch captains, with names such as Enos, Bethel, and Saunders, vied in epic clipper-ship runs, made necessary to get their gragrant cargoes to northern ports before the fruit became too ripe.

No roads—sea-using; no back country—just as today in most of the Bahaman Islands. Only jungle trails and beach-front paths. Along Biscayne Bay, the old Indian Trail along the very Bay past Lemon City and Coconut Grove, past to old Cutler—which latter area was first called "Indian Hunting Grounds." Thus this West Indian life extended from Key West "up along" to Lake Worth.

About that time there was a distinct English influence on the lower East Coast, many Englishmen coming directly to Florida. Some came first to the West Indies—just as they were also at that time coming in increasing volume to English colonies in the Caribbean, such as Barbados and Jamaica—and many of these from there drifted to the Florida mainland. Among those coming directly from England were the Peacocks, who came in 1870—two brothers, Charles and Jack, one of whom, Jack (with his sons) began the commercial planting of fruits and vegetables in the Bay Country. They shipped vegetables by sailing packet to Key West and from there to the northern markets by Mallory steamers. This shipping was first done in barrels. The other Peacock brother, Charles Peacock, started one of the earliest stores, and the Peacock Inn, the first tourist hostelry on the mainland, south of the older Indian River civilization. Other early English settlers were: Benest, who settled where now is Miramar, in Miami; Lord Haigh of Cat Key; the John Ellises; Pickford, who started the first Biscayne country sawmill; the Reverend James Bolton, who was one of the first preachers on the Bay. An important phase of this English influence was the guiding of the social life of the time by the establishment of the first church on the Bay; the formation of the Coconut Grove Housekeepers Club; and the other first activities of the women in social ways. It was due quite largely to this English influence of the Peacock family and of other English folk that a higher type of social life than would obtain usually in such an isolated pioneer

community was to be found along the Lower East Coast of Florida, especially on the Bay, at this time. Flagler later called Grandmother Peacock, "the Mother of Coconut Grove." Likewise this English influence stimulated the first commercial planting of groves and of vegetable experimentation for Northern markets.

Now I come to an influence that had a marked effect on the Lower East Coast—that of the Bahaman negro. Through the 70's, 80's, and right through the 1890's, they were practically the only available workers—the Georgia negroes did not come in any volume until after 1900, after the coming of the Railroad. In this West Indian period all of our heavy laborers were Bahaman negroes. I believe these Bahaman negroes had a most distinct and important influence, in that they brought inspiration to many of the first English, French, Northern and Southern planters; to all of those early settlers who at first were skeptical of the coral-rocky country, forbidding and desolate from the planting standpoint. In the Bahamas there is the same coral rock; and the Bahaman negroes knew how to plant on it; and how to use it: and they knew too that all kinds of tropical trees would grow and thrive on this rock. They, too, had a vital influence upon our civilization in bringing in their own commonly used trees, vegetables and fruits. Soon these supplemented all those that had been brought in by the Bahaman whites—the sea-living Conchs. Such things were introduced as the pigeon pea, soursop, star-apple, sugar apple, Jamaica apples, and all the anons—caneps, sapotes, and dillies. These fruits can still be found in best profusion in the Bahaman colored village in Coconut Grove (which was first called Monrovia, and which was the first Bahaman negro settlement on the Bay) and also in their villages at old Lemon City, Cutler, and Perrine. These negroes had built their homes in their own islands of the Coral rock, and they brought here their skill in masonry building. Today, some of the oldest buildings in Coconut Grove and old Cutler are of the same construction which has been in use for one hundred and fifty years in the Bahamas. Built without cement with only the native lime mortar, these houses have withstood the countless hurricanes of the Bahamas! This knowledge of building with the native coral limestone came with Bahaman negroes, as did so much other valuable knowledge and experience in the building of walls, roads, other uses of the cora; and uses of the land, of the sea.

Then there was the French influence about that time. In the eighties many Frenchmen came in directly from France, just as they were coming into other West Indian countries, under the influence of the writings of Lafcadio Hearn, Pierre Loti, and others. Some went to the French colonies

in the Caribbean—Martinique, Guadeloupe, etc. But many came to Lower South Florida. Among them came Count Hoedeville, Count Nugent, the Courleys, and, later, the Faudells, Fornels, Brondgusts, Le Jeunes. These had a distinct influence, as did the English, especially on the social life of the pioneer settlements, and gave a very marked impetus to the commercial planting of groves and fruits.

Now I come to what I call the first "cracker" influence, beginning in the early 1850's, and running down to the eighties. These were mostly adventurers coming in from North Florida, Georgia, Mississippi, Alabama, and the Carolinas, drawn by the adventurous tropical life, largely hunters and trappers, and after the seventies trading at such as the Brickell Trading Post at the mouth of the Miami River, and Stranahans Indian Trading center, on the New River. They lived much as did the Indians themselves, working commercially only in the coontie starch making. Coontie was one of the main foods of the native Seminole Indians; the whites found it was good to eat and it became an important part of their food. They learned how to process it crudely into a very edible starch. Also it was used for laundry and other uses. It was shipped in barrels down the Hawk's Channel to Key West and sold there, distributed principally in Havana, Tampa, Pensacola, and New Orleans. This industry, along with the trapping of wild animals for their skins, was what these more truly frontiersman folk of this first Cracker invasion found to do in Lower South Florida. They were coast living, however, as much as the Conchs! There was still no back country. They still lived on the beach, or nearby.

But from their infusion came the first connections to the north, as opposed to the Conchs' trading route and magnetic pull to Key West! There came then the first boats sailing northward to connect the Lower East Coast with the old established Indian River civilization. The stern wheelers there connected northward to St. Augustine and Jacksonville. The first mail routes northward were by foot along the beach, along by the Houses of Refuge, on to Lake Worth, and up to Rockledge on the Indian River. Sailboat connections from Biscayne Bay, via the inland bayous, were made at Lake Worth with the "Celestial Railroad" at the head of the Lake Worth Bayou. The "Celestial Railroad" was a narrow gauge, portage railroad, connecting, across a long sandy strip, the lower end of Indian River at Jupiter, with Juno on upper Lake Worth, and with Neptune in between. (Thus the Celestial name!) Finally, in the eighties, there was developed a stage coach line over the old Indian, and the Indian fighters Coast Trail. This stage coach connected the Biscayne

Bay country with Fort Lauderdale on the New River, and with the Lake Worth settlements. Thence, passengers went on northward by Celestial Railroad and by stern wheeler. It saved the arduous sailboat connection between Biscayne Bay and Lake Worth, which usually had to be made "on the outside."

We come now to the beginning of the tourist influence, which dates back distinctly to the establishment of the Peacock Inn by Charles Peacock and his son, Alfred in about 1880. This was the first tourist convenience provided south of Rockledge on the mainland, and remained the only tourist facility for many years. Inspired by some prominent authors of that time who were writing of this paradise frontier—men like Sidney Lanier, Audubon, Agassiz, and later Kirk Munro, whose articles appeared regularly then in Harper's—adventurous tourists began to come in to the Peacock Inn, at first by sailing packet from Key West, then later by these other developing transportation routes from the north. Celebrities came such as Grover Cleveland, Lieutenant DeWilloughby, Guy Carleton, Joe Jefferson, and many writers who in turn further publicized this tropical frontier. These came, all, to the Peacock Inn. It became a very famous hostelry in those early days. And it was responsible for the first beginning of the tourist influx. Of course, for many years previous there had been tourist facilities in Key West, which then was a world crossways. But there had been none upon the Keys or the mainland of Lower South Florida until the Peacocks opened their Inn, with its delightful English flavor and service.

The earliest agricultural influence of the mainland centered around the large Spanish slave plantation—the old Fitzpatrick plantation which was in what is now the Brickell Hammock. This plantation in the nineties already was legendary. But, then, in the nineties the old stone walls were still there, to be stumbled over by the first homesteaders. The walls were overgrown by giant gumbo-limbos and wild rubbers, and dogwood that looked like virgin growth. Still standing were those old slave-piled walls of ancient fields of sea-island cotton and indigo. Then, after the Civil War, there were the plantations of the Gleasons, the Englishes, the Gilberts, the Dayes, the Evans, whose master was called the "Duke of Dade," and the Wagners. These older plantings were at the mouth of the Miami River, at Brickell Hammock, and at what is now known as old Allapattah. Then there was the land of the Peacocks, down the Biscayne shore at Coconut Grove, where the first commercial planting of vegetables began. Later came the commercial fruit groves started by the English and the French settlers and of such earliest homesteaders as the

Ellises, the Potters, and the Douglasses. The first great pineapple plantation of T. V. Moore, who came down from the older Indian River civilization and developed pioneer plantings on the Bay was behind Lemon City and Little River. Finally there was the Rockdale Plantation of William Brown.

Henry Perrine nearly sixty years before the Flagler Railroad, had started an ill-fated colonization on Biscayne Bay at what is now Cutler, bringing in many Bahaman families, and later, northern families. He also worked in planting experimentation on the Keys. Later, during the 1830-40 Indian War, he was killed by the Seminoles, at Indian Key. Dr. Perrine was aided by the Government in the introduction and culture of tropical growths from many other tropical lands. The devotion and sacrifice which he gave to this work for thirty years, right up to the time of his death, and the voluminous accounts of his projects, ideas, and undertakings which he left behind him in his notes and in his articles sent to the department, contributed in no small measure to the luxuriant tropical growths—of commercial and beauty value—which characterize the Lower East Coast today. They served as an impetus and inspiration to the labors of those who followed him here in this same field. Such men as Dr. John C. Gifford and Dr. David Fairchild, among others, are making history in this field of endeavor which has meant so much to our area and which will inevitably mean so very much more.

I might also mention the first jelly factories of Captain Simmons, of English James Bolton, and of Carnell, another Englishman. Something, too, should be said of the first post offices: one at Miami in the fifties, later closed to be opened again in the eighties; one opened on Lake Worth, in the seventies; one at Coconut Grove in the fifties, closed, and opened with Charles Peacock as Postmaster in the eighties. Dade County at that time extended from Bay of Florida to the St. Lucie River. Nor must we omit mention of Miss Flora McFarland, who started the first school for the children of the mainland, a private one, at Coconut Grove; of Mrs. Caleb Trapp, who in the early eighties, started the first public school, also at Coconut Grove. The earliest permanent church, on the lower mainland was a Union Church established in the eighties at Coconut Grove by the Methodists, and by the Reverend James Bolton for Congregationalists, and the Reverend Kegwin for the Presbyterians. The first library in Lower South Florida, on the mainland, was the Coconut Grove Library, founded in late eighties largely through the efforts of the Munroes. The Housekeepers Club, the first permanent women's social organization, was founded in the late eighties by Flora McFarland. The first permanent

cemetery was the Cocoplum Cemetery, platted in late eighties, and still existent a half mile southwest of Coco Plum Plaza in Coral Gables.

I will touch but briefly on the wealth of interesting material relating to those early ones of vision, who foresaw Greater Miami. In the late 70's there was a great plat of Cape Florida by the Davis family of Galveston, showing a city to be, at Cape Florida, on Key Biscayne, the present great coconut plantation of the Mathesons. The first recorded city plat in Dade County was of a 200 acre tract, cut into city lots, near the bay front in Coconut Grove, in early eighties by Joseph T. Frow. There was Samuel Rhodes' vast grove in the early eighties of the City of New Biscayne, where now is Coconut Grove and Dinner Key Airport. And of course it was Julia Tuttle's plat and planning at Fort Dallas, her vision and devoted efforts, continuing until she was finally successful in bringing Flagler in to take up her holdings and incorporate her plans into his larger development, which actually brought "The Magic City" into being.

Now we come, lastly, to what I call "the great cracker influx." This was from '84 to '96, and was occasioned by the series of great freezes, freezing out the extensive groves of north and north-central Florida; throughout that old flourishing civilization of the St. Johns River Valley, and even in parts of the old settled Indian River country. Those ruined grove owners, largely Georgia and North Florida men, came into the Biscayne Bay Country by ox cart, on muleback, by stage-coach, sailing boat, stern wheeler. They began taking up the homesteads which had just been platted and surveyed by the Government. They began pushing back from the Bay four and five miles and more toward the edge of the great Glades. And, this at last was the beginning of the back country! The first permanent steps back from the Bay were being taken. The first lasting steps away from the sea, away from the long-accustomed West Indian culture! Now the paths between the homesteads became trails. The trails became roads. The log-trails to Englishman Pickford's sawmill, which was sawing out the timber from the snaked-in logs for the first homesteaders' cabins, became now the first rock paved roads. For now there were people in the Bay country demanding ruts for the wagon-wheels, instead of channels for boats!

Now there was completed in Dade County and on the lower Florida peninsula an historic cycle. Here on the shores of Biscayne Bay, English Conch cousin met English cracker cousin. The one, the Conch cousin, had started from the coastal territories of the thirteen colonies. He came by way of the sea; by way of the Bahamas, to the Biscayne shores. The

English Cracker Cousin came, too, from the coastal parts of the thirteen colonies. He went up into the Appalachians. Then, down the years, down through rolling Piedmont of Carolinas, down through the flatwoods and the pinewoods of Georgia and Florida, he had finally come to Biscayne Bay; and there the English Cracker cousin met the English Conch cousin! And one knew the sea, and one knew the land! Thus was brought about the dramatic closing of an historic cycle.

Thus, there came about, before the coming of Flagler and his iron highway, the founding of our back country. And it inevitably caused to fade out that life of our first real homefinders and land-users, that most interesting and romantic period on our lower East Coast of Florida, that of our West Indian Civilization.