

Tequesta:

Colonel Thompson's "Tour of Tropical Florida"

By GEORGE R. BENTLEY

In the fall of 1865—as in most subsequent autumns—many Northerners were eager to gain information about Florida. The New England Emigrant Aid Company was trying to plant a colony there.¹ Discharged soldiers of the Union armies were already moving into the Peninsular State, and other Yankee adventurers were with them.² Harrison Reed, who would one day be Florida's Governor, had newly arrived from Wisconsin and was opening a newspaper at Jacksonville.³ The man destined to be his Lieutenant-Governor, William H. Gleason, appeared in Tallahassee in the latter months of 1865 and sought an opportunity to inspect the state.⁴ In Virginia one W. H. Hunt inquired if the Freedmen's Bureau would not build some mills—probably cotton mills—on Government lands in Florida. He proposed to operate them for the Bureau, and he would promise "to place one thousand Freedmen and their families above requiring assistance from the Government Provided: they are placed upon lands of my selection under the Homestead Law in the State of Florida" The Bureau did not give Hunt either the mills or the contract he wanted, but some of its leaders became greatly interested in Florida as a possible refuge for Negroes. Orlando Brown, head of the federal agency in Virginia, submitted to Bureau Commissioner Oliver O. Howard a plan to invite as many as 50,000 Virginia Negroes to migrate to Florida.⁵ Howard thought so well of this proposal

¹ Robert L. Clarke, "Northern Plans for the Economic Invasion of Florida, 1862-1865," in *The Florida Historical Quarterly*, 28:263-264 (April, 1950).

² General John G. Foster's report of July, n.d., 1866, in Freedmen's Bureau Records (in the National Archives), Records for Florida, Letters Sent.

³ L. J. Farwell and others to Oliver O. Howard, May 26, 1865, in the Oliver O. Howard Papers, Bowdoin College Library, Letters Received.

⁴ Thompson's Report, in the Tallahassee *Sentinel*, April 19, 1867.

⁵ W. H. Hunt to C. B. Wilder, September 28, 1865, in Freedmen's Bureau Records, National Office, Adjutant General's Division, Letters Received (Hereinafter records of this office will be cited simply as "Bureau Records."); Orlando Brown to Howard, October 4, 1865, and December, n.d., 1865, both in *ibid.*

that he began drawing up a bill by which Congress might set aside public lands in Florida, Mississippi, and Arkansas for Negro homesteaders. And to facilitate matters he directed his Assistant Commissioner in Florida to inspect and report upon the lands that might be made available.⁶

This officer, in fact, already had commenced such a survey. He was Colonel Thomas W. Osborn, of New York state.⁷ Because of a railroad accident in which he had suffered a severe injury to his shoulder, Osborn had not begun his duties in Florida until the first week in September. By then the Bureau was organized and operating in the other ex-Confederate states. To compensate for his late beginning—and for his complete unfamiliarity with Florida—Osborn had decided to divide the state into five sections and to send out parties to inspect and report what they found. They were to be concerned especially with the needs of the Negroes but also with the attitudes of the white people towards the Union, the products of the soil and employments of the people, the economic opportunities and the lands available for homesteading or purchase, and any other matters that might be helpful to the Bureau in its work or to Northerners seeking opportunities for profitable investment of capital.⁸

For his inspection of the sparsely populated, wilderness-like southern half of the peninsula, Osborn chose a thoroughly competent observer, George F. Thompson, Commissary Captain and Brevet Lieutenant-Colonel.⁹ Thompson received his orders on December 4, and on the 6th he left Tallahassee to visit the counties of Hillsboro, Manatee, Moore, Dade, Brevard, Polk, Orange, and Volusia. Accompanying him was William H. Gleason, whom Osborn had appointed a "special Agent" of the Freedmen's Bureau, and who could hardly have found a better opportunity to inspect those parts of the state most available for immigration and exploitation.¹⁰

The first stage of Thompson's and Gleason's tour was by rail but was neither direct or easy. They wanted to begin the inspection at Tampa, where they believed they could both get the desired information about Hillsboro

⁶ Howard to G. W. Nichols, December 29, 1865, in the Howard Papers, Letters Sent, 1861-1866:164; Howard to W. H. Hunt, December 18, 1865, in Bureau Records, Letters Sent, 1:456.

⁷ For an interpretation of Osborn see my article "The Political Activity of the Freedmen's Bureau in Florida," in *The Florida Historical Quarterly*, 28-28-37 (July, 1949).

⁸ I have not found any of the five reports except Thompson's. However, there is a lengthy, composite synopsis of all of them in Bureau Records, Synopses of Reports, 1:228.

⁹ Thompson's report was published in serial form in the *Tallahassee Sentinel*, April 19, 23, 26, 30 and May 3 and 7, 1867. An official copy is enclosed in Osborn to Howard, May 8, 1866, in Bureau Records, Letters Received.

¹⁰ Thompson's Report, *Tallahassee Sentinel*, April 19, 1867.

County and learn the most feasible way to make an examination of Manatee, Monroe, and Dade Counties. To reach Tampa they went via the Jacksonville, Pensacola and Mobile Railroad to Baldwin and thence on the Florida Railroad to Gainesville. Both railroad companies were reluctant to transport Thompson's and Gleason's horses, which were delayed twenty-four hours at Lake City. When an additional two days' delay was threatened at Baldwin, Thompson had his orderly drive the horses to Gainesville. From that point, on December 11, the inspection party went by horse to Tampa.¹¹

There Thompson conferred with Captain O. B. Ireland, of the 99th United States Colored Troops, who was then the commanding officer at Tampa. Ireland assured Thompson that the Negroes in the vicinity were doing well, "even better than the whites," that they did not want for food or clothing, and that they found plenty of labor at fair wages. However, reported Ireland, white Unionists at Tampa and for miles around were less fortunate. They formed a small minority ostracized and oppressed by the "rebel" majority. Some were "pursued with murderous intent," and "there was no safety for a Union man to walk the streets, or be found alone in the highway . . ." Deputy United States Marshal Jenks corroborated these opinions and said that he himself was "hunted . . . day and night, and upon more than one occasion had barely escaped the assassin's bullet."¹²

As if in direct proof of these assertions, in the evening of December 19, at about ten o'clock, three pistol shots rang out near Thompson's quarters. Hardly had the reports sounded when Ireland and Jenks rushed in to report a fresh attempt on Jenks' life. But Thompson felt that this was a trick, and one "too patent to impose upon our credulity," for he reasoned that if there had really been an attempted murder the officials would have hurried to capture the would-be assassin rather than to inform the colonel of the alarming state of affairs.¹³ The next day Thompson talked with several of the local citizens and deliberately made opportunities for them to express hatred of the United States. "Yet," he reported to Osborn, "we failed to detect any ground for those highly colored statements which had been made [by Ireland and Jenks]. We neither saw nor heard of any murdered victims or rebellious hate; no bands of roving desperados roaming through the country for their prey . . . in fact, nothing to excite the fears or to discourage an honest and courageous man." He concluded that there might be some danger of "collisions" between Floridians who had supported the Confederacy and

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

those who had been Unionists—because of their war-born hatred for each other—but that there was little likelihood that any class would attempt to “subvert, or to resist the Government.” At the end of his tour he felt that “so far as the hostility of the people to Northern men is concerned, I would as soon live in any part of Southern Florida as in the city of Washington or Boston.”¹⁴

Thompson had thought he might cross Florida from Tampa and go down the east coast to the Miami River. However, several men who knew the country told him that the water was so high in the creeks and rivers of the interior that it would be impracticable to cross the peninsula, and perhaps very hazardous. Therefore he decided to charter a boat and sail down the Gulf coast, occasionally stopping to go up a stream or to march into the interior far enough to obtain a satisfactory knowledge of the country and its condition. As a guide, he employed Mr. Louis Bell, a native of the region, whose experiences during the Seminole War, in 1857, as mail carrier from Tampa to Fort Myers, gave him an intimate knowledge of the whole coast.¹⁵ Thompson would have liked also to hire a man to assist in sailing the boat and to cook for the party but could find only two unemployed white men in Tampa, and they both demanded \$1.50 a day, a sum Thompson deemed exorbitant. Suspecting that the men were simply avoiding labor by setting their price so high, the colonel decided to do his own work, and sailed without a cook.¹⁶

Between December 20, 1865, and January 5, 1866, Thompson and Gleason visited several points on the Manatee River, some of the islands in Charlotte Harbor, the Peace Creek country, Fort Myers, and Estero Bay. They spent two or more days at a point ten miles up Peace Creek, where they found a detachment of colored troops and a party of cattle herders. From the latter they received much valuable information about the country, and from the soldiers they borrowed horses to extend their explorations several miles back from the river. This seemed to them a sufficient inspection of the area, for most of the men living within fifty miles were in the party of cattle herders at Peace Creek.¹⁷

These men, Thompson discovered, were not at all true to the stereotyped “lazy Southerner.” “Action and physical exercises” were “the requirements of

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, April 23.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, April 19.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, April 30.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, April 19. Thompson used the spellings “Pease” Creek and “Ostero” Bay.

their vocation," and they were "as active, hardy [a] set of men as are found in any northern latitude."¹⁸ One of the cattle owners told Thompson that he had almost to live with his stock, and that he could be at home with his family but little. Indeed, the care of the cattle was so exacting an employment that the people of the area had not even time to produce corn for their own use. Several told Thompson that they brought the grain from sixty or more miles away, after paying \$2.25 or more per bushel. Their cattle were small, the best "netting no more than five or six hundred pounds." They would bring \$6.00 a head for an "entire stock," or \$14.00 to \$18.00 for selected animals. The principal market was Havana, but many cattle went also to Savannah and Charleston. The drovers Thompson had met were employed by Mr. Jacob Summerlin "(reported to be the largest stock raiser in the country)." Thompson saw them load 250 head aboard a steamer bound for Havana, and doubted that the cattle would average over 350 pounds. He estimated that there were in the area, "both east and west of the Kissimmee river" some 150,000 cattle worth perhaps \$900,000.¹⁹

Homes in this part of Florida were generally log houses or huts, raised two or three feet from the ground, and lacking both windows and chinking. Thompson wondered "whether Adam and Eve had fewer comforts or conveniences for housekeeping" than the family of a "principal stöckraiser" he visited.²⁰ It seemed to him that the men of the region had "extremely limited ideas as to providing" and the women no idea at all how to use the little that was provided them. Their cooking was so repulsive to Thompson that he averred that only "the direst necessity and a deep sense of moral obligation to preserve his own life" could induce "a person of refined habits and taste" to undergo such a diet. The principal articles of food, as Thompson described them, were pork fried "to the consistency of a piece of dry hide," corn bread "about as delicious and gratifying to the taste as an equal quantity of baked saw-dust," "Hayti potatoes" boiled "until the vegetable matter leaves to the water a proportion of about 1 to 100," and hominy "prepared by scalding with hot water." With everything else grease was used to the greatest excess. On the Gulf Coast, said Thompson, women gave much more attention to the culinary arts, and the articles of food were more numerous.²¹

Thompson interrupted his journey from Peace Creek to Fort Myers by visiting several fishing parties located on the islands in Charlotte Harbor.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, April 30.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, April 19 and 23.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, April 23.

²¹ *Ibid.*

The largest was a group of eighteen men employed by "Messrs. Dewey, Bennet & Co., from Conn." In five or six weeks they had taken and cured more than 1800 quintals of fish worth \$6.00 to \$7.00 per quintal at Havana. The waters seemed to Thompson to be "completely alive" with mullet, and he was also impressed with the large numbers of tarpon, jewfish, redfish, and oysters. An important sideline for the fishermen—who received for their labors \$25.00 to \$30.00 per month and their found—was catching sharks and extracting the oil. Thompson predicted that "at no distant day" the fisheries of South Florida would be the basis for an important industry.²²

Another enterprise which appeared promising to Thompson was citrus culture. He believed there were only three or four orange "orchards" on the Gulf south of Tampa and only one on the Atlantic coast of the counties he toured. The two groves he inspected were located at Sarasota Bay and at Fort Myers. The former, owned by a Doctor Snell, contained about three hundred orange trees and one hundred lemon trees, while the Fort Myers grove was slightly larger. Both were badly neglected but produced the most delicious oranges Thompson ever had tasted. He noted how easy it would be to transport such fruit to New Orleans and St. Louis, and thought it could not be many years before citrus culture would support a thriving population all along the coast from Tampa Bay to Cape Romans. The banks of the Caloosahatchee and Manatee Rivers seemed to Thompson especially well adapted to the citrus business because of their fertility and ready access to transportation.²³

After visiting briefly Fort Myers and Estero Bay, Thompson and his party went on to Key West, the largest city in their tour of inspection. They found there four churches for white people and one for Negroes. At Tampa they had found three churches, though not all of them held regular services. Tampa's two schools had accommodated about eighty pupils, in the primary grades only; while Key West had schools for 160 scholars, two for white children and one for Negroes.²⁴ Thompson gathered the impression from the local authorities that the younger Negroes learned as rapidly as whites, but that Negroes from sixteen to twenty "do not seem to have that power of application, and learn less rapidly." From his own observation he was "thoroughly convinced . . . that, compare the negro with the whites, in reference to his desire for education, his respect for religion, or his disposition to

²² *Ibid.*, April 30.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

lead an industrious life, he is in none of these respects their inferior."²⁵ This opinion was not entirely complimentary to the Negro, for Thompson had very little esteem for the Gulf Coast Floridian's industry. His experience with the two unemployed white men at Tampa rankled Thompson, and one of the most intelligent men of the area had informed him that the long summer heat resulted inevitably in a "lassitude, an unavoidable indisposition to physical exercise, which neither habit nor any amount of mental stimulant or association could remove." That this was a "libel upon the climate" seemed to Thompson to be proved by the great physical activity of the cowboys in their vocation. Thompson believed that the Negroes in the region he inspected were no lazier than the white people, and that they had "a higher regard for the law and civil authority than a majority of the whites."²⁶

In all of Dade County Thompson found but three Negroes, and none of them was in any need of Freedmen's Bureau aid.²⁷ However, so enchanted was the inspector by the area that he remained there from January 27 to February 14, and gave the county much more than its proportional share of his report. "Exhilarating" Biscayne Bay breezes, mid-winter flowers, singing birds and verdant vegetation convinced him "beyond all question" that Dade County's climate was "the most equable of any in the United States." His guide, who for several years had lived at the "Hunting Grounds" beside the Bay, testified (with some pre-Chamber-of-Commerce-ish exaggeration) that he never had suffered in midsummer with the heat more than he did just then—when the temperature was staying close to 74°!²⁸

In this inviting land Thompson said there lived only about 200 white people, and most of them were on the keys to the south of Miami.²⁹ There were perhaps 600 Indians living in the Everglades at the rear of the county, but they were friendly to the whites. They had a "passion for wrecking" and they made their own decrees of salvage-division. Another passion was for whiskey, which they could obtain at a dirty shanty store operated on the Miami River by "French Mike" Sayers. Deer, bear, panther and other skins were the Indians' chief stock in trade, and they lived principally on game, fish, corn, and the indigenous, wide-spread kountee.³⁰

The latter vegetable provided a means of livelihood for some of the white people also, for a fine starch could be made from kountee roots. At

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*, May 3.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*, May 7.

one of the "factories" on the Miami River three workers with very rude machinery were producing a thousand pounds of starch per week. It would sell for from ten to twelve cents a pound in Key West, where kountee starch was preferred to all others for laundering. Thompson thought the supply of kountee was inexhaustible, and he reported that six barrels of the root would make one barrel of starch.³¹

Other Dade County occupations noted by Thompson were wrecking, fishing, sponging, and turtle hunting. There had been several attempts to manufacture lumber, but it seemed that most of the trees were too small for any other uses than those of making turpentine or building cabins and fences. The hammocks were thickly forested with such trees as red, white, and live oaks, mastics, wild figs, and—thought Thompson—magnolias, but these small islands of high ground comprised in all not one-tenth of the non-Everglades part of the county. Six-tenths of the "available surface" was pine barrens, whose small, scattered, gnarled trees and "honey-combed, rotten limerock surface" presented a sight rather repulsive "at first." The most promising parts of the county, Thompson judged, were the low prairies of 500 to 5000 acres in extent. Apparently formed by the washing of vegetable matter from the Everglades, they had deep soil of great fertility. After making a "somewhat careful examination of several of them," Thompson believed that "a system of drainage and dyking [*sic*] would succeed in reclaiming some of them for profitable cultivation."³²

The products of the soil of the county especially attracted the attention of the inspecting party. Besides the plentiful kountee there were oranges, lemons, limes, bananas, "cocoa nuts," grapes, "and all tropical fruits." The easy growth of the castor bean, combined with an increasing demand for castor oil and the government's liberal tariff protection, caused Thompson to commend the cultivation of the bean "to the especial attention of those who seek the settlement and development of this county."³³ Sisal hemp also stirred the colonel's imagination. It would grow "with astonishing rapidity, even upon the poorest soil." If some feasible means could be found for separating the fibre from the rest of the plant, the hemp would "open this country to rapid development even by the lowest class of labor."³⁴ A former South Carolinian told Thompson that Dade County yields of fine long-staple cotton were much larger than those in the Palmetto State. The south Florida

³¹ *Ibid.*, May 3.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*, May 7.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, May 3.

county, reported Thompson, would also produce excellent Cuba tobacco and sugar cane of a "prodigious size."³⁵

Not even Eden was perfect, and Thompson did find that Dade County had some disadvantages for settlement. There were many moccasins and rattle snakes in the hammocks, and wild cats, panthers, and bears. But worse by far than these were the hordes of mosquitoes and flies which seemed to "vie with each other in their efforts to torment humanity." Even in mid-winter Thompson's party found the insects "almost intolerable." They were informed that in April and May there would appear blue-head flies and grey flies almost as large as honey bees, which would attack cattle and horses in such painful numbers as to drive them mad and even to kill them.³⁶

But on the whole both Thompson and Gleason were most favorably impressed by Dade County. Its people had no educational institutions whatever, but their frequent contacts with seafarers and others from all parts of the world made them more intelligently alert than Florida's inlanders.³⁷ The county's comfortable climate and promising opportunities attracted the official visitors. They liked also the springs of cool, clear water "boiling up and rippling the waters of the bay" along the beach at the Hunting Grounds—in the bed of the Miami River, about four miles from its mouth, they saw a spring which had been enclosed so that its waters formed a fountain three or four feet above the river's level.³⁸ They concluded that Southern Florida might some day become the "Garden of the United States."

For the realization of this possibility, however, Thompson believed that one thing was essential—the lowering of the waters of Lake Okeechobee. He believed if the lake level could be lowered by six feet nine inches, which he understood to be the amount of fall from the Everglades to Biscayne Bay, much of the wet lands of Dade County and the Kissimmee River Valley could be opened for cultivation and settlement. Unless these areas could be spared "annual inundations"—by a reduction of the Lake level—Thompson believed the southern part of Florida could never be generally settled.³⁹ He recognized that the Hunting Grounds springs he so much admired must have their sources in the Everglades, but apparently it did not occur to him that a draining of those sources might work evil as well as good.⁴⁰

³⁵ *Ibid.*, May 7.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*, May 3.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, May 7.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* For an account of some of the damages implicit in Thompson's plan see Marjory Stoneman Douglas, *The Everglades, River of Grass*, 314, 316, 246-350, 373-379.

In concluding his report Thompson said he thought the Negroes in the southern half of Florida needed little aid from the Freedmen's Bureau. Perhaps it should help them establish schools. And it might well encourage their "universal desire to become land owners" by assisting them to settle upon the public lands, under the conditions of the homestead law.⁴¹ The Bureau did both of these things, but not to any great extent in the counties where Thompson had travelled. Orlando Brown's plan to send Virginia's surplus Negroes to Florida came almost to naught,⁴² and Oliver Howard's bill to reserve Florida, Mississippi, and Arkansas lands for Negroes was weakened in Congress and did not result in much Negro homesteading.⁴³

A more important effect of Thompson's tour of inspection was one of its by-products. A few months after the end of the tour William H. Gleason brought his family from Virginia to the shores of Biscayne Bay.⁴⁴ Colonel Thompson had commended his "superior intelligence and enthusiastic devotion" to the work of inspection, and had reported Gleason's services to have been "indispensable to the measure of success" achieved by the tour.⁴⁵ Now Gleason was beginning a seventeen years' residence in Miami and its vicinity. In those years he would grow tropical fruits, speculate in Dade County lands, and play an important role in Florida's political history.⁴⁶

⁴¹ Thompson's Report, Tallahassee *Sentinel*, May 7, 1867.

⁴² Horace Neide to Orlando Brown, March 17, 1866, in Freedmen's Bureau Records for Virginia, Letters Received.

⁴³ *United States Statutes at Large*, 14:66-67; Bureau Records, Endorsement Books, 2: 231, 292.

⁴⁴ W. H. H. Gleason to J. C. Yonge, May 22, 1947 (ms in the P. K. Yonge Library of Florida History).

⁴⁵ Thompson to Osborn, April 30, 1866, in Freedmen's Bureau Records for Florida, Letters Received.

⁴⁶ The Tallahassee *Floridian*, March 10, 1868.