

Dr. Strobel Reports on Southeast Florida, 1836

Edited by E. A. HAMMOND

The official transfer of the Territory of Florida by Spain to the United States in 1821 was the signal for a notable increase of interest among many American citizens in the little-known land. Some looked upon it as a place of economic opportunity, others as a land of adventure. The most casual examination of the newspapers of the Atlantic seaboard towns for the years of the 1820's and 1830's reveals an ever increasing number of dispatches from Florida correspondents. At the same time many travelers and settlers ventured to discover for themselves the wonders and possibilities of this remote area. Neither the southern tip of the peninsula nor the keys themselves escaped the curious notice of the migrants from the states to the north. And yet it remained for the Second Seminole War (1835-42), and in particular for certain atrocities committed by the outraged Seminoles against the encroaching whites, to whet the interest to a sharp emotional pitch, and to set the newspapers and their readers off in an almost frantic search for information on the comparatively unknown territory of Florida.

The reaction of Charleston, South Carolina, for many years linked commercially to St. Augustine and the Florida ports of the Gulf of Mexico, was perhaps typical. News of the massacre of Major Francis Dade and his detachment of troops on December 28, 1835 had stunned the citizens of the city. Immediately thereafter, as the military authorities were busily mustering the regular units as well as new recruits for a Florida campaign, the Charleston newspapers were printing every available scrap of information which might in some measure clear up the mystery and dispel their ignorance of Florida. What of these savage Seminoles? And what of the terrain which they occupied? What might the South Carolina Volunteers expect to encounter when they arrived?

It was to provide answers to such questions, and without doubt at the urging of the Charleston *Courier*, that Dr. Benjamin B. Strobel¹ set about in January, 1836 to record some of his recollections of South Florida — recollections gleaned from nearly four years of residence at Key West, and occasional visits to the mainland of South Florida. By mid-January, how-

ever, South Carolina had issued a call for volunteers to stamp out the Indian menace and avenge the murder of Major Dade. Dr. Strobel, a genuine adventurer, an amateur naturalist, and above all an expert on Florida, quickly took his place as regimental surgeon in the volunteer regiment of Colonel A. H. Brisbane. With his unit he left Charleston on February 11, 1836 for three months of campaigning, which took him from St. Augustine diagonally across the peninsula to Tampa Bay, and back to Picolata on the St. John's. His descriptions of Florida were thus terminated after three installments (printed in the *Courier* of February 3rd, 4th, and 5th), with an editorial note of regret, and a promise that the series would be resumed as early as possible. The rigors of the campaign and the demands of his medical office made it impossible for Strobel to fulfill the promise, however.

The three items, reproduced below, are of particular interest to students of the Everglades and the Miami area. Dr. Strobel was by no means the first white man to make a boat trip up the Miami River into the Everglades. Indeed he seems to have been inspired to make the journey by an account given him by a wrecker captain who had previously made the same trip during the high water season, "and had sailed, in a fast boat, for three days in a Northerly direction, with a fair wind, without being able to discover any bounds in that direction." He also knew of another party, "starting at New River, and sailing West for two days, without reaching its [the Everglades'] Westerly bounds." Strobel gives no indication that he knew of the account of the Everglades published by Charles Vignoles in 1823.² Although John Lee Williams visited the lower East Coast in 1828, his account of the area did not appear in print until 1837.³ The account of Buckingham Smith, a more comprehensive report, made its appearance in 1848. So it would appear that Strobel's description of his boat trip from the light house on Key Biscayne, across the bay to a point not far from the present mainland terminus of the Rickenbacker Causeway, thence up the coast to the mouth of the Miami River, and via the Miami River into the Everglades and return, is one of the earliest in existence. His exploration was carried out in late September, 1829; his description was prepared some six and a half years later probably from notes or sketches produced at the time of his sojourn in Key West, 1829-33.

SKETCHES OF THE PENINSULA OF FLORIDA

No. 1

By DR. STROBEL

I resided at Key West for nearly four years, and, from time to time,

visited nearly all the Keys, and the mainland as far as New River. Subsequently I was engaged by a company of gentlemen in New York, to visit and explore that portion of the Peninsula lying in the neighborhood of Tampa Bay and Charlotte Harbor.⁴ It concerns not, however, the public, what motives impelled me to engage on this expedition, whether induced thereto as an agent for speculators, or as a votary of science, so long as the account which I render is just and true.

It is not my present intention to enter into a minute detail of the natural history of Florida; my object is rather to give a brief outline of the general appearance and character of the country, which may be intelligible to the general reader.

The diversity of opinion expressed in reference to the surface of the country, the depth of the rivers, and the character of the soil, may be explained without referring it to any sinister motive. During the rainy seasons, the water from the adjoining high lands rushes down into the lower land of which the peninsula consists. In finding its level the water collects in these low spots, and, not having easy access to the sea, rises to considerable heights and overflows the adjacent country for miles, leaving only the higher points of land visible. During the dry seasons, on the contrary, when the everglades, lakes and inland ponds, having had sufficient time to pour their contents into the ocean — the surface of the soil is made visible — the banks of the rivers are observed for many feet above the surface of the water, and the whole aspect of the country is changed. It is far, very far, from my intentions to question the veracity, or impugn the motives of others. I was myself deceived in regard to the character of this country, and may claim the credit of having induced the company by which I was engaged, to abandon the speculation, as I was satisfied on personal inspection, that the land which had been selected for them, did not answer their expectations.

My first visit to the Peninsula was in the month of September, 1829. I was then acting as Assistant Surgeon in the United States Army, and was sent by Major GLASSELL, commandant of the garrison at Key West, on board a vessel chartered for the purpose, to procure sand suitable for making mortar — there being none at Key West fit for that purpose. My orders were to touch at all the Keys, where that article was likely to be obtained, and to select the most convenient position.

We visited nearly every Key between Key West and Cape Florida, and were not able to discover a particle of sand or silex short of Key Biscayne,

which lies about S.S.W. of Cape Florida.⁵ The character of the Keys may be stated in a few words. Some of them consist entirely of Mangrove swamps; others of sand banks, with a few Mangroves; whilst others are based on coral reefs, or limestone, probably formed from the decomposition of shell, and covered with a thin layer of superficial alluvial soil, from six to eighteen inches deep. The growth upon these latter is almost exclusively that of the tropics. At Key Biscayne, the soil partook more of the character of the adjacent mainland, from which it is separated by a narrow channel, called Bear Cut.⁶ It is covered with fine white sand, probably washed upon it from the neighboring shore. About the middle of the Island I saw a swamp containing the saw Palmetto. The Northern and Eastern part of it is covered with Mangrove, whilst on the Southern side, a fine white hard sand beach extends from the light house, situated on its S. Western point, to Bear Cut, a distance of nearly eight miles. The beaches of the Keys generally consist of finely pulverized shell, differing in this respect from that of Key Biscayne. Having concluded that this would be a suitable place for procuring the sand which we wanted, the depth of the water back of the light, and the boldness of the shore, being such as to enable our vessel to land alongside, I ordered her to take in a cargo, and whilst the hands were employed loading her, I determined to make a visit to the main land. This I was enabled to accomplish, through the politeness of Mr. DUBOSE,⁷ the keeper of the light house, who furnished me with a boat and hands, and recommended me to the kind attentions of an old lady who lived at the Cape.

We started about 12 o'clock, in a sail boat, and ran along the North side of Key Biscayne, with a fine breeze. On approaching the Cape, we found that the water began to shoal gradually. The point of land to which we steered our course was steep and perpendicular, consisting of a wall of limestone rock, twelve or fifteen feet above the level of the water, which resembled an ancient fortress, with two portholes descending nearly to the level of the water. At one of these we landed, and ascending a rude flight of steps, I found myself at the door of a neat palmetto hut which was seated on the brow of the hill. It was quite a romantic situation. The cottage was shaded on its western aspect by several large West Indian fruit trees, whilst on its eastern side we found a grove of luxuriant limes, which were bowing to the earth under the weight of their golden fruit. This was the residence of the old lady⁸ to whom I had been recommended, and who was bordering on 80 years of age. I entered the house and made my devoirs. She received me graciously and placed before me some Palmetto and Icaica plums, and after refreshing,

politely conducted me *herself* over her grounds, and showed me a field of potatoes and corn which she cultivated. She generally employed several Indians for this purpose, who for their labor received a portion of the products. I visited also the lands of some settlers who lived about two miles north of the Cape. The soil in this vicinity appeared to be tolerably good in particular spots. I saw some few live oaks and some pine barrens. On the margin of the river Miami, there is some live oak hammock, but I am inclined to think that the soil would very soon be exhausted by cultivation, as it consists almost entirely of vegetable matter, partially decayed, and of no great depth, as will be illustrated by the following anecdote:—A gentleman at Cape Florida informed me that he had cut down trees, with the intention of clearing a field to plant. In order to get rid of the trees which had been felled, in an expeditious manner, he set fire to them, and on the following morning was greatly surprised to find that he had not only destroyed the trees, but had also burnt off the whole of the soil, and left nothing but the bare rocks. It being now late, I was under the necessity of returning to the light house. We had a delightful sail, and welcomed back by the piping of myriads of mosquitoes, of which we shall take occasion to say more hereafter.

[Charleston *Courier*, Feb. 3, 1836]

NO. II

I promised some account of the mosquitoes in my last. No one can form any conception of their number, or their annoyance to man and beast, who has not visited the Florida Keys in the summer months. I have known the deer to forsake the woods, and lie along the shore to avoid them. It was not uncommon at Key West, to see a drove of cattle lying to windward on the beach at night. But of all the places in the world for mosquitoes, Key Biscayne is entitled to the preference, saying nothing of the sand flies. Their everlasting hum never ceases. Morning, noon and night the ear is assailed with their baleful noise. Mr. DUBOSE, the keeper of the light, had provided himself with a flapper, for which he found employment night and day.

On my return to the light house, I accepted the polite invitation of Mr. DUBOSE to sup with him. The table was placed in the piazza. We were surrounded with smoke pans, and enveloped in smoke, but still found it necessary to keep our hands and feet in active motion to avoid the assaults of the enemy. After supper I went on board of our sloop — our beds were brought on deck, and our mosquito nets spread, and we ensconced beneath them. But, alas, it was fruitless labor. The enemy stormed and assailed us in

every direction. One of the sailors swore that they had divided into two gangs, and that one hoisted the net, whilst the other got under and fed, and I verily do believe there were enough of them to have done it. After tossing and tumbling, slapping, scratching and grumbling, for about three hours, I gave up all prospect of sleeping, and proposed to the Captain that we should get up and take a walk on the beach, which lay to the windward. Here if we could not sleep, we might at least escape our tormenters. He assented — we crossed the Island, and walked some four or five miles on the beach by moonlight. The breeze from the water was delightful and refreshing, and we enjoyed it until near daylight, when we returned on board, to make another effort to sleep, but we positively could not close our eyes, until we covered ourselves over head and ears, with cloaks and blankets. Of the two evils we were compelled to choose the least, and took the steam in preference to the mosquitoes.

After such a night, it may well be imagined how glad I was for the dawning of day and the hour of rising. Providing myself with a stock of provisions to last for several days, I started in the boat, and in little more than an hour, sprang ashore at Cape Florida. Here I found Indian JOHN, who spoke some English, and usually acted as interpreter. For fifty cents a day, his food and a little whiskey, he agreed to be my guide into the everglades. He launched his canoe, hoisted his sail, and stationed himself at the stern, with his paddle, as steersman. The boat being very small, I seated myself in the bow, with my gun, and off we went.

We crept along the shore until we reached the mouth of the Miami River, which we entered. This river empties itself at or near Cape Florida, and arises from the everglades. Its course was about North-East,⁹ its depth from 6 to 10 feet, the bottom hard and sandy. The banks were elevated from 6 to 8 feet above the then level. It must be recollected, however, that the water was low. After proceeding some two or three miles, the river forked, one branch going to the right, in a course about E.N.E.,¹⁰ whilst the left branch proceeded more Northerly. JOHN asked me what course to take, for the everglades or the Falls of Miami. On my indicating the Falls, he took the branch which led to the right. After paddling some two or three miles, we discovered the Falls, which was a small sheet of water, flowing quietly over a rock, some five or six feet above the level upon which we then floated. On either side of the river, I saw some small live oak hammocks. The trees were neither very large nor majestic. The higher points of land, which were sandy, contained a growth of pines and of saw palmetto.

My guide having informed me that the water was too low to enable us to proceed by this route beyond the Falls, we returned back to the Fork, and took the branch which led in a more Northerlyⁿ direction. Proceeding in this direction about five or six miles, perhaps a little more, we opened the everglades.

By the everglades is meant an immense tract of country, lying in the middle of the Southern portion of the Peninsula. At certain seasons the whole of this region is laid under water, excepting, of course, the higher points of land, which then constitute so many islands. The extent of this lake, for so it may be called under such circumstances, is unknown. A captain of a wrecker told me that he entered it once at high water, and sailed, in a fast boat, for three days in a Northerly direction, with a fair wind, without being able to discover any bounds in that direction. I have also heard of another party, starting from New River, and sailing West for two days, without reaching its Westerly bounds. The Indians traverse these everglades in all points, with their canoes. The depth of the water varies at different places and in different seasons. We coasted along the Eastern shore and found from two to three feet (of) water. I have been told that in some places it is as deep as ten or twelve feet. In the shoal parts, the bottom appears to be covered with long, rank grass, which in some places was so thick as to impede the way of our canoe. This is called by the people broom grass. I could of course form no estimate of the width of the everglade from my own personal observation. As I coasted along the Eastern shore, the view to the West of us was obstructed by a number of small Keys and Islands; some of them, at the distance I saw them, appeared to be covered with mangroves, others nothing more than grass knowls, while the shore appeared to be in other places fringed with cypress. The Indian JOHN told me that higher up in the everglades, some of the Islands contained pine.

The everglades are bounded on the Eastern side by a ridge of high sandy land — high in comparison with themselves. The growth upon this land consisting of pines, saw palmetto, and in some few places, particularly along the borders of the rivers flowing into the sea, of narrow strips of live oak hammock, and occasionally a few hickories and cabbage palmettoes are met with.

The Western boundary consists in part of a similar neck of land, interrupted at intervals with mangrove islands. To the South it extends nearly to Cape Florida, whilst its Northern boundary is unknown. In this last

direction, it is supposed to terminate in lagoons and cypress swamps. The extent, both as to length and to breadth, must vary in proportion to the quantity of water. The descent from the shores to the middle of the everglades, being very gradual, in some places not more than two or three inches to the mile, so that a rise of six or eight inches will inundate the country for miles.

[*Charleston Courier*, 4 February, 1836]

NO. III

When about half way between New River¹² and the Miami, our water suddenly shoaled, and we were under the necessity of getting out and dragging our canoe over. This place is called by the people the Dividers, the water South of it running toward the Miami, whilst that on the North empties itself at New River. It appeared to be nothing more than a sand bank, running from East to West.

As we approached New River, the land upon our right consisted of the same pine sandy barren as I have already described. The Indian arrow root called coontie is found here in great quantities. We landed, and collected several roots, which were very large, weighing several pounds. This is the Indians' principal bread stuff. It is met with in most of the pine barrens in this section of Florida, but it grows in such profusion in this neighborhood, that they come from considerable distance to procure it. Mr. COOLY (whose wife and children were so inhumanly murdered by the Indians a short time since) was engaged in the manufacture of this article, and had brought it to great perfection. The following is the manner of preparing it.¹³ A sufficient number of roots being collected, they are peeled, washed, and grated, in the same manner as potatoes, and thrown into large tubs of water. After remaining in soak for a certain length of time, the water is stirred and strained; by this process it is freed of the feculent matter. The coarse portion thus separated, may be given to hogs, while the finer portion, which passes through the sieve, is allowed to settle. The farina, which is almost insoluble in cold water, subsides at the bottom. The water is drawn off, and the yellow portions which remain on the top are removed. The white arrow root, which, from its specific gravity, is found at the bottom, is collected, and repeatedly treated with fresh water, until it becomes perfectly pure, and white, of a granular, glistening, crystalline appearance. I am inclined to think, that when thus prepared, it is very nearly, if not quite equal to the Bermuda arrow root, not only as a starch, but also as an article of diet.

And here I may as well mention the circumstances attending the murder of Mr. COOLY's family, as they are calculated to illustrate the treachery of the Indian character.¹⁴ He had resided among them for many years, spoke their language well, and treated them with uniform kindness and hospitality.

Indeed, such was his friendship for them, that he named his sons after two of their chiefs. Standing in this relation, and confiding in their professions of friendship, which had led him into a fatal security, he left his home for a few days, and returned to find it desolate. His wife and children had been murdered, and the smouldering ruins of his house lay before him. It is a remarkable fact that the villains who did the deed, had not the hardihood to scalp the poor wife and her three innocent children. Was it the recollection of former friendship that induced them thus to spare? Or were they conscious that their own savage colleagues would have blushed for the chivalry of those warriors, who could find no work more befitting their tomahawks and scalping knives, than the cruel butchery of women and children? The unfortunate schoolmaster¹⁵ shared a different fate — to him they owed no obligations of friendship: he was a man, and as such, capable of resistance — his scalp was therefore torn from him, and borne off as a testimony of their cruel and savage triumph.

It should be borne in mind, that in their devastation of his other property, Mr. COOLY's manufactory was spared. This, no doubt, will be serviceable to them hereafter, in preparing their food. I have no pretensions to being a military man, but it appears to me that it would be well to place a sufficient body of troops, between Cape Sable and New River, to get [cut] off the supplies of the Indians from that quarter, and to prevent them from escaping into the everglades, from whence they may readily pass to the Florida Keys. If they once cut down into the everglades, they will scatter like a covey of partridges, and each one will have to be hunted up separately, which will be an interminable task.

Towards night we came up with a camp of Indian hunters, who were lying around their fire. We went ashore, with the determination of joining them. On our approach, a dog sprang out, and uttered a noise between a yeall and a bark, which echoed and re-echoed throughout the woods. In an instant the Indians were on their feet; but a whoop from JOHN soon brought them down upon their haunches. We went up, and seated ourselves around their fire.

They at first seemed to take no notice of me. As they sat on the opposite side of the fire, their dusky faces partly obscured by the current of smoke.

Occasionally they eyed me sulkily, and by stealth. A few words, chiefly monosyllables, passed between them and JOHN, but they did not enter into any lengthy conversation. A silence of some minutes having elapsed, which induced me to believe that I was not a welcome guest, I concluded that something must be done to conciliate. I therefore told JOHN to inform them, that I had something to eat, and some fire water, and that we must be good friends. This information acted upon them like a charm. They began to snuff the air like a parcel of hungry dogs, became more sociable and conciliatory, brought out some fresh venison, which they placed over the coals to broil, having first run a stick through it. To keep my word, I produced my cold ham, and biscuit, and gave each (they were in number three), about a gill of Gin. The instantaneous effect of which astonished and alarmed me. It was almost miraculous, from being silent and demure, they became talkative and forward. They insisted upon having more whiskey, and endeavored to possess themselves of the bottle by force, and I was obliged to conceal it. They were now unable to repress their flow of spirits, and began to sing, and dance, and make most horrid faces, thrusting their tongues out of their mouths, and rolling their eyes in every direction. As they reeled and yelled and danced around the fire, throwing themselves into the most ludicrous attitudes they resembled a parcel of infernal spirits, or the furies. This sport they continued until perfectly exhausted when one by one, they sank upon the ground, and fell into a sleep. I placed my buffalo skin on the opposite side of the fire, covered my head with a cloak, and slept soundly until morning. The Indians were up betimes — they rose from their lairs, shook themselves, kindled the fire and ate a scanty meal. Upon the subsidence of the effect of the liquor, all their former reserve seemed to have returned. Having collected some Coontie, they placed it along with their venison in their canoe, paddled rapidly up the everglades and were soon out of sight. It being now time for me to think of returning, JOHN and myself took the opposite direction, and paddled back for Cape Florida, and as we had nothing to delay us, arrived at the Cape about three o'clock in the afternoon, where according to agreement I found Mr. DUBOSE's boat in waiting for me. So that I was enabled to reach the light house about six o'clock in the evening.

[*Charleston Courier*, 5 February 1836]

FOOTNOTES

- ¹ Dr. Strobel, a biographical sketch of whom I am currently preparing, was born in Charleston, South Carolina, in 1803. A graduate of the Medical College of South Carolina, class of 1826, he arrived at Key West in September, 1829, and became Assistant Surgeon to the army post on the island. Subsequently he became a general medical practitioner for the civilian population of Key West. In the spring of 1831

he established a newspaper, the *Key West Gazette*, which he continued to publish and edit till September, 1832 when he discontinued the effort. Taking his family back to Charleston, Strobel proceeded to New York for the purpose of offering his services as explorer and consultant to the Florida Peninsula Land Company, which had taken an option on a portion of the Alegon grant, and whose agents had arrived in Key West to begin their explorations in the summer of 1832 prior to Strobel's departure. (C. L. Bachman and J. B. Haskell, *John Bachman*, Charleston, 1888. See letter from the Reverend Dr. John Bachman to J. J. Audubon, p. 125.) Hurrying back from New York, Strobel arrived in Key West again in January and joined the group exploring the coast from Cape Sable to Tampa Bay. (See John Lee Williams, *The Territory of Florida*, New York, 1837, pp. 289-299.) Strobel made two additional journeys to Florida: in early 1836 as regimental surgeon for Colonel A. H. Brisbane's South Carolina Volunteer Regiment, and in 1839 for the purpose of observing the characteristics of the yellow fever epidemic in St. Augustine. (He was at that time in the process of preparing a treatise on yellow fever in an effort to prove its transmissibility. B. B. Strobel, *An Essay on the Subject of Yellow Fever Intended to Prove its Transmissibility*, Charleston, 1840.)

- 2 Charles Vignoles, *Observations upon the Floridas*, New York, 1823. This author makes no mention of the Miami River.
- 3 Williams, *op. cit.*
- 4 See note 1 *supra*.
- 5 Strobel betrays either a faulty knowledge of geography or an uncertain sense of direction, or both. He apparently never understood that the southern tip of Key Biscayne was generally designated as Cape Florida, but seems instead to have attached that name to the mainland coast in the area just south of the Miami River. This possibly derived from the fact that many maps of the early nineteenth century showed the entire area south of the Miami River for several miles as "Cape Florida Settlement." Also Strobel assigns to the longer dimension of Key Biscayne an east-west direction. John Lee Williams, *op. cit.*, p. 34, located the Cape Florida lighthouse at the west end of Key Biscayne.
- 6 Bear Cut, or Bears Cut, today separates Key Biscayne from Virginia Key.
- 7 The lighthouse keeper was without doubt J. W. Dubose who in 1824 witnessed a deed for the transfer of one hundred and seventy-five acres of land on Key Biscayne from Rafael Andreu [Andrews] and Francisco Andreu to Mary Ann Davis. Deed recorded 8/10/1824. *Spanish Land Grants in Florida*, III, 3. See also M. M. Cohen, *Notices of Florida and the Campaigns*, Charleston, 1836, p. 80.
- 8 I have tentatively identified this woman as Susan Hagen, who in 1824 sought to have her grant of land confirmed, "Susan Hagen 11/9/1824, 640 acres on the south side of the Miami River, near Cape Florida, a donation grant. 'She was, and has been in actual habitation and cultivation' of the land 'between 14 and 15 years.'" *Spanish Land Grants in Florida*, III, 207-8.
- 9 Here again Strobel's directions are in error. The course of the lower portion of the river was generally north and west.
- 10 The course of the north fork was northwesterly.
- 11 The course of the south fork was westerly.
- 12 The New River still flows through the center of Ft. Lauderdale.
- 13 For a modern account of this process see Emile De Boyrie Moya, Marguerita K. Krestensen and John M. Goggin, "Zamia Starch in Santo Domingo," *The Florida Anthropologist*, Vol. X, No. 3-4, pp. 17-40.
- 14 This massacre occurred on January 6, 1836, only four weeks before Strobel's sketches appeared in the Charleston *Courier*. He had doubtless learned of it through the Charleston newspapers. Since he had personal recollections of the Cooly plantation, and since the massacre had aroused such interest and indignation in Charleston, Strobel chose to repeat a story of which many of his readers were certainly already cognizant. See the account of the massacre in Cohen, *op. cit.*, p. 79.
- 15 Cohen, *loc. cit.*, identifies the schoolmaster as a Mr. Flinton.