

# The Florida Excursion of President Chester A. Arthur

By JOE M. RICHARDSON

President Chester A. Arthur, who partook as freely of the pleasures as of the labors of Washington, was beginning to feel the strain of his rapid pace by early 1883. Observant friends noticed that his face was lined and his eyes dull. He was gaining weight, but losing energy, and by March, it seemed obvious that steps had to be taken to avoid serious illness. A combination "personal health-seeking" and a political pulse-taking trip to Florida was planned for April.<sup>1</sup>

Florida, by 1880, was becoming fashionable as a winter and early spring resort for wealthy Northerners. The "balmy" Florida winters had captivated the "Northern Sybarites," who, as regularly as October returned, fled by the thousand "from the rigors of their native frosts and snow-storms." Every winter the number of tourists was larger and they lingered longer. An estimated 150,000 excursionists visited Florida in the winter of 1884-1885.<sup>2</sup> "It is surprising," the Cincinnati *Commercial-Gazette*, reported in March, 1883, "when inquiring for the businessmen of New York, to ascertain that so many of them have sought the softer clime of Florida." A visit to Florida in the winter was almost as fashionable as a trip to Europe in the summer for wealthy New Yorkers whose bank accounts were in better condition than their health.<sup>3</sup>

Joseph Medill, editor of the Chicago *Tribune*, remarked upon his return from Florida in April, 1883, that the State was swarming with Northerners and to a casual observer appeared to be a Northern community. Natives were amicable toward Northern visitors and claimed to be "thoroughly recon-

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<sup>1</sup> George F. Howe, *Chester A. Arthur: A Quarter-Century of Machine Politics* (New York, 1935), 243-44; Bess Furman, *White House Profile: A Social History of the White House, its occupants and its festivities* (New York, 1951), 237.

<sup>2</sup> "Florida: The State of Orange-Groves," *Blackwood's Magazine*, CXXXVIII (September, 1885), 319; Tallahassee *Weekly Floridian*, April 17, 1883.

<sup>3</sup> Cincinnati *Commercial-Gazette*, March 11, 1883.

structed," Medill said.<sup>4</sup> Preparing for a southern tour in 1884 a New Yorker shook off the snow, went into a shop, and asked for four yards of silk tissue. Not in the least astonished the saleslady filled his request and said: "Yes, sir; veils. For Florida? We sell this veiling every day in winter . . . No mosquito can get through it. Dreadful weather sir."<sup>5</sup> In addition to its salubrious climate<sup>6</sup> the State was noted for its abundance of wildlife; a region where the deer fed with a "shocking tameness," wild turkey seemed domesticated, and fish could be caught without "trouble or skill."<sup>7</sup> Since Arthur was an ardent angler, the Florida climate was salutary, and a Southern tour might be efficacious politically, the "Sunshine State" seemed a logical selection for a recuperative trip.

On April 5 the Arthur entourage, which included Secretary of the Navy, William E. Chandler, Arthur's private Secretary, F. J. Phillips, Arthur's chef, and Aleck Powell, a Negro messenger, left Washington by a fast mail train.<sup>8</sup> Reporters accompanying the President were impressed by the change in architecture as they went further into Florida; a change they attributed to the "Yankee element" which had been drawn to Florida in a "spirit of enterprise."<sup>9</sup> After a delay caused by a broken coupling, Arthur arrived in Jacksonville on the evening of April 6, where he was greeted with the most enthusiastic demonstrations of the entire trip. A welcoming committee headed by Jacksonville Mayor, W. McL. Dancy, and Horatio Bisbee, Jr., a Republican United States Congressman from Florida, met Arthur at Callahan to escort him into Jacksonville. The streets were filled with well-wishers, and the Jacksonville Light Infantry, the Florida Light Artillery, and the Negro Infantry were waiting in formation. "As the train neared the depot deafening cheers from the throng which had gathered there rent the air," and a salute of twenty-one guns was fired. In a brief reply to a welcoming speech Arthur expressed his "most cordial thanks" for the flattering attention, which he said, he recognized as a demonstration of Florida's respect for the Chief Magistrate of the nation and loyalty to the Federal

<sup>4</sup> An interview with Medill reported in the *New York Tribune*, April 12, 1883.

<sup>5</sup> "The Cruise of the 'Wallowy,'" *Harper's Magazine*, LXX (January, 1885), 216.

<sup>6</sup> George E. Walton, "Remedial Value of the Climate of Florida," *Popular Science Monthly* XXII (March, 1883), 642-50; XXIII (May, 1883), 114-15.

<sup>7</sup> "The Drainage of the Everglades," *Harper's Magazine*, LXVIII (March, 1884), 602.

<sup>8</sup> *New York Tribune*, April 6, 1883.

<sup>9</sup> *New York Times*, April 13, 1883.

authority he represented. A representative of the Negroes greeted him not only as the Chief Magistrate, but as a "life long friend."<sup>10</sup>

Originally the President had intended to spend the night in Jacksonville but decided to continue to Sanford, perhaps because smallpox had broken out before he arrived. At least twenty-five cases had occurred among the Negroes and within a few weeks twenty-four deaths were reported.<sup>11</sup> The Presidential party boarded a steamer on the St. Johns River and arrived in Sanford in the early afternoon of the 7th after a "beautiful river trip" which was "generally enjoyed" by all. The "fairy-like scene," Chandler declared, "surpassed anything he had ever imagined about Florida."<sup>12</sup> The President expressed surprise at finding a "place so beautiful" and "accommodations so admirable" at Sanford.<sup>12</sup>

After dining the Presidential party was driven to the Belaire orange plantation of Henry S. Sanford, founder of the town, professional diplomatist, and former minister to Belgium. Much to the delight of the visitors some of the over-ripe fruit was still on the trees. After several unprofitable efforts to secure fruit from the ground, Secretary Chandler "shucked" his coat, gaily climbed a tree and picked some.<sup>13</sup> That night at Sanfords the visitors enjoyed what they considered a rare treat. A few Negro boys gathered around an "ebony hued" comrade who was "tum-tuning" a banjo and singing in a tenor voice:

Oh! Where is my beauty gone?

Meet me by the moonlight alone.

The others soon joined the chorus "accompanied by pattering feet and occasionally the clicking bones." Two "frightfully unkempt and ragged" boys began to dance in unison. Arthur and friends heard the music and soon became attentive listeners. Song followed song until near midnight much to the gratification of the visitors.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*; Jacksonville *Florida Times-Union*, April 7, 1883; New York *Tribune*, April 7, 1883; Rowland H. Rerick, *Memoirs of Florida* (2 vols.; Atlanta, 1902), I, 355.

<sup>11</sup> New York *Times*, April 7, 1883; T. Frederick Davis, *History of Jacksonville, Florida and Vicinity 1513 to 1924* (St. Augustine, 1925), 165.

<sup>12</sup> Jacksonville *Florida Times-Union*, April 11, 1883; New York *Times*, April 8, 13, 1883; New York *Tribune*, April 8, 1883; William E. Chandler Diary April 6, 1883, New Hampshire Historical Society Library, Concord, New Hampshire.

<sup>13</sup> Jacksonville *Florida Times-Union*, April 11, 1883; New York *Times*, April 8, 1883; Leon B. Richardson, *William E. Chandler: Republican* (New York, 1940), 356; William E. Chandler Diary, April 8, 1883.

<sup>14</sup> New York *Times*, April 13, 1883; Jacksonville *Florida Times-Union*, April 11, 1883.

On Monday, April 9, Arthur left Sanford for Kissimmee City in an irritable mood. He had been in good humor up to the close of the minstrel show Saturday night, one reporter said, but Sunday he "began to look bored and Monday morning found him savage and dangerous." Secretary Chandler soon joined the ranks of the indisposed. The party stopped at Maitland, a few miles from Sanford, and then went by buckboard to Winter Park, which reporters said was the prettiest town of all. Chandler was in the back seat of the buckboard with a lady when the seat gave way in a dip in the road throwing them both out backwards. The lady was unhurt. Chandler was momentarily stunned, but soon discovered that he had suffered no injury beyond "a violent wrench" of his back. He laughed about the mishap quipping that as he had no backbone to spare it was unfortunate that it should be injured.<sup>15</sup>

At Winter Park the party again boarded the train. Arrangements had been made to entertain the President at Orlando, but the irritable Arthur refused to stop. He did, at the urging of companions, go out on the platform where he "bowed and smiled." However when the train stopped rather than merely slowing as he had ordered, he fled inside the car with a look of "intense" anger and disgust. The President boarded the steamer, *Okeechobee*, at Kissimmee and went out on Lake Tohopekaliga. Accompanying reporters believed themselves to be at the end of civilization since telegraphic communication went no further south. However observers were ecstatic about the surrounding scenery. The land region was described as "a sea of maiden cane embroidered with bay and cypress" and other vegetation which was "everywhere magnificent in its richness and variety of color and tones."<sup>16</sup>

His art as an angler was soon demonstrated by Arthur. He caught five ten pound bass in Reedy Creek and was reported "well and in good spirits."<sup>17</sup> His friends spoke of his fishing as though they honored him more as the "First Angler than as the First Magistrate of the Republic."<sup>18</sup> He was a record salmon fisher having taken fifty pounders, and his casts with a "mere trout fly" had been measured at seventy-eight feet. He was called the "finest

<sup>15</sup> Philadelphia *Public Ledger*, April 10, 1883; New York *Tribune*, April 10, 1883; Jacksonville *Florida Times-Union*, April 15, 1883; New York *Times*, April 11, 1883; Howe, *op. cit.*, 245; Alfred Jackson Hanna, *Fort Maitland: Its Origin and History* (Maitland, 1936), 19-20.

<sup>16</sup> Jacksonville *Florida Times-Union*, April 17, 1883; New York *Times*, April 11, 1883; "The Drainage of the Everglades," *Harper's Magazine*, LXVIII (March, 1884), 601.

<sup>17</sup> Philadelphia *Public Ledger*, April 11, 1883.

<sup>18</sup> St. Louis *Post-Dispatch*, April 12, 1883.

amateur caster in the world." The fishing proved to be excellent. On Tuesday morning the President caught a ten pound bass the first time he cast a fly. All present agreed that the insects were not annoying and the weather was superb, though Arthur did blister his face "till he scarce could touch it. . . ." The rest of the party spent more time shooting alligators than fishing.<sup>19</sup>

Later in the day Arthur went to Fort Gardiner, on the Kissimmee River, where he met Tom Tigertail a sub-chief of the Seminoles. Tigertail was accompanied by his mother, two wives and a child. Tigertail was, according to observers, "extremely dignified" despite his costume of a gray bandana tied around his head with feathers in its fold, another handkerchief around his neck, a calico shirt which he wore outside his trousers under a waistcoat, and moccasins. After solemnly shaking hands the Indian chief eagerly accepted a cigar from the White Chief which he lighted with a cigar he snatched from the President's mouth. Arthur gave the child, who was strapped to the back of its mother in a "gaily decorated case," a quarter, and Chandler gave Tigertail his pocket knife.<sup>20</sup> The Seminoles promised Arthur a special tribal dance if he would journey as far South as Lake Okeechobee, but Arthur was content to stop sooner. He had penetrated the wilderness to a point within sixty miles of the Lake and the public was told "he had reached the end of civilization." "White civilization" ended there, a reporter wrote, "the lower part of the State being in possession of a cow-boy race known as Crackers, who herd cattle exclusively over the prairie lands, and of a remnant of a race of Seminole Indians who hunt, fish and raise crops in the Everglades." After leaving Tigertail, Arthur continued to fish, catching 16 weighing 100 pounds.<sup>21</sup>

Soon Arthur had enough fishing and on Wednesday, April 11, returned to Sanford badly sunburned but in good health. There was to be an informal reception for the President Thursday evening but he abandoned his intentions because of rivalry arising between leading citizens as to who should make the introductions.<sup>22</sup> Though he was not eager to leave Sanford, Arthur embarked

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<sup>19</sup> Jacksonville *Florida Times-Union*, April 17, 1883; Philadelphia *Public Ledger*, April 12, 1883; New York *Times*, April 12, 1883.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, Jacksonville *Florida Times-Union*, April 14, 1883; William E. Chandler Diary, April 10, 1883.

<sup>21</sup> Alfred Jackson Hanna and Kathryn Abbey Hanna, *Lake Okeechobee: Wellspring of the Everglades* (New York, 1948), 173-74; New York *Tribune*, April 10, 1883; New York *Times*, April 12, 1883.

<sup>22</sup> New York *Times*, April 14, 1883.

April 13, for the "quaint old town" of St. Augustine by way of Jacksonville where he was greeted by a reception committee headed by General Fred Dent, brother-in-law of ex-President Ulysses S. Grant.<sup>23</sup> The next morning the President was welcomed in St. Augustine by a wind and rain storm, but by noon the weather was fine and he amused himself by wandering alone on foot about town. Sunday evening Arthur, in company with Secretary Chandler and three ladies, attended a Negro Methodist Church where the choir and congregation sang for more than an hour for him.<sup>24</sup>

Monday and Tuesday the Chief Magistrate entertained himself fishing and roaming around town, and early Wednesday, declining an invitation of Governor William D. Bloxham to visit the Capital at Tallahassee, boarded the *Tallapossa* for Savannah.<sup>25</sup>

President Arthur arrived in Washington April 22 reportedly more ill than when the recuperative trip began. While in Savannah he had been seized by "a congestive chill." However, upon arrival in Washington, Arthur asserted that he had never felt better in his life, and to observers he appeared tanned and healthy.<sup>26</sup> The President's biographer stated that Arthur never recovered from this illness which has led many to assume that he contracted an illness on the trip which led eventually to his death November 18, 1886.<sup>27</sup> In reality Arthur already had the beginnings of Bright's disease, which caused him to have the shortest life span, fifty-six years, of any president to that time, except James K. Polk who died at fifty-three.<sup>28</sup> Chandler claimed the illness was caused by a long ride in the sun and believed the President had been "greatly benefited by his excursion," and had "visibly gained in health and vigor."<sup>29</sup>

Arthur and Chandler both returned from Florida with fond remembrances of the State and faith in her future. Chandler found the land higher and vastly more fertile than he expected and thought there would be

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, April 15, 1883.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, April 17, 1883; *Nation*, XXXVI (April 19, 1883), 332; William E. Chandler Diary, April 15, 1883.

<sup>25</sup> William E. Chandler Diary, April 18, 1883; *New York Tribune*, April 19, 1883; *New York Times*, April 17, 1883; *Philadelphia Public Ledger*, April 19, 1883.

<sup>26</sup> *Nation*, XXXVI (April 26, 1883), 354; *New York Tribune*, April 20, 1883; *Philadelphia Public Ledger*, April 21, 1883; Howe, *op. cit.*, 246.

<sup>27</sup> Howe, *op. cit.*, 246, 286.

<sup>28</sup> Furman, *op. cit.*, 237.

<sup>29</sup> *New York Tribune*, April 23, 1883.

profit in excessive sugar growing. The forests and orange-grove lands were of great value, he said, while the winter visitors swarmed at every available resort. Towns were springing up where a few years ago there had been none, and he thought much of the land could be redeemed by draining the swamps.<sup>30</sup> Generally Floridians returned Arthur and Chandler's friendly sentiments though some of the Democratic newspapers were bitter. Chandler, of unsavory fame as a lobbyist, but who had come to be considered the ablest man in Arthur's cabinet was subjected to the most severe attacks.<sup>31</sup> Florida Democrats were not unified during this period. They were held together only by white supremacy, and some Democrats saw the Arthur-Chandler trip as an attempt to coalesce Democratic "bolters" with Republicans.<sup>32</sup> The Tallahassee *Weekly Floridian* shrilly warned Democratic bolters against falling for any plans proposed by Chandler. "Patriotism is represented by the organized Democratic Party of today," the editor wrote, "and who is traitorous to that is treasonable to his country, for on the maintenance of its principle depends the perpetuity of Republican institutions."<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, Democrats remembered that Chandler had come to Florida when the election had been disputed in 1876 and suggested that he was in Florida in 1883 because he thought that in 1884 "the vote may again be so close that his arch manipulation will enable a repetition of the grand larceny of 1876."<sup>34</sup>

Apparently neither Chandler nor Arthur was much concerned with politics while in Florida. Arthur was ill, decided to vacation in Florida, and despite minor outbursts of irritability the trip was a huge success. As the *New York Times* said when discussing the "state of great excitement" of the "excessively virtuous small fry of the Democratic press" over Arthur's trip, the President was "entitled to a reasonable amount of relaxation and to judge for himself when and how to take it."<sup>35</sup> Arthur, because of its reputation for climate, healthiness, and fishing, selected Florida. Politics were incidental.

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, Jacksonville *Florida Times-Union*, April 17, 1883.

<sup>31</sup> Ward Thoron, ed., *The Letters of Mrs. Henry Adams 1865-1883* (Boston, 1937), 436.

<sup>32</sup> Kathryn Abbey Hanna, *Florida Land of Change* (2nd ed. rev., Chapel Hill, 1948), 325.

<sup>33</sup> Tallahassee *Weekly Floridian*, April 10, 1883.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, April 10, 17, 24, 1883.

<sup>35</sup> *New York Times*, April 6, 1883.

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