

Glimpses of Antebellum Florida: Tampa Bay, Key West, North Florida

By BARTLETT C. JONES*

Certain picturesque and significant insights into antebellum Florida may be found in two unpublished diaries in the Winterthur Library.¹ Neither diarist wrote extensively about Florida nor became prominent in her affairs—one, indeed, remains unidentified. These facts partially explain why the diaries have not been used by students of Florida.

John M. S. Hoxie came to Florida sometime prior to 1820. He recorded his accounts and commodity prices, then began a diary which intermittently ran from September 30, 1824 to November 19, 1825. His early economic activity included cutting and shipping timber. (On September 30, 1824 he noted that a schooner carrying 800 feet of his timber was feared lost at sea.) By June of 1825 he had located on an island on "Hillsborough River," and had begun erecting a salt works in Symrnea.² That September, when salt production began, he was deeply involved in preparations for raising oranges and other fruit. Believing himself the first in Florida history to cultivate mangrove marsh, Hoxie wished to make his island a successful fruit farm ensuring wealth, pleasure and "as little communications with my fellow men as circumstances will permitt." [sic] Although he seems to have had no experience in raising citrus and knew of no "compilation" on orange trees, he had explored contemporary agricultural lore sufficiently to acquire the belief that caustic lime would counter the salt in the soil. The hurricane of October 1 and 2, which ruined his plantation including 150 small orange trees and 67 almonds in boxes, convinced Hoxie that his island could never become a profitable fruit farm. He considered moving to New River and raising tropical fruit.³

*Dr. Jones is an Assistant Professor of History and Social Sciences, an American Studies specialist, at the University of Florida. The Winterthur Museum gave permission for the quotations from manuscripts in the institution's library.

¹Winterthur, formerly the home of Henry F. DuPont near Wilmington, Delaware, houses the finest collection of American decorative arts ever assembled. The home became a museum, and an M.A. program in early American culture was established cooperatively with the University of Delaware in 1955. I am indebted to Winterthur for a fellowship to attend a summer institute in August, 1970.

²I surmise that this river flowed into Hillsborough Bay, near contemporary Tampa; but could not determine which stream, the North or South, was meant. I can find no reference to Smyrnea in early maps or histories of Florida.

³The New River, flowing through Liberty and Franklin Counties to the Gulf of Mexico, would today be considered too far north for tropical fruit. Disastrous freezes of the late 19th and early 20th centuries drove the Florida citrus industry further south.

Discouraged with his salt business, disgusted with his fellow Floridians, Hoxie decided in November to begin cane planting. The conclusion of the diary at this point leaves us a portrait of an ambitious, hard-working and ingenious individual who had yet to find a secure place in the primitive economy of Florida.

Two portions of the diary and sketchbook of an unidentified Boston artist depict a pleasant, simple Florida society. During a visit to Key West (March 3-17, 1851), the artist sketched the following scenes whose precise lines suggest training as an engraver: "Key West—Sandy Key—Sea View, boats, cook's house"; "Key West—Sandy Key—Sea View, boats, old mule in water"; "Key West—Sandy Key—House and cocoa-nut trees"; "Key West—Sandy Key—Gager's House"; and "Key West—View of part of town."⁴ The Key West Art & Historical Society might also be interested in the visitor's random observations, quoted here in full.⁵

Monday 3d We saw the land at a distance last night, & (to)day are passing quite near it, & close to the celebrated reef where the wrecks occur—Saw the lighthouse buildings on Carysfoot reef which seems to stand in the open sea—The color of the water is constantly varying & often as green as emerald.—At six o'clock we stopped at Key West, & I was glad enough to shake hands with Mr. Lewis, who took me up & installed me in very nice quarters with Capt. & Mrs. Curtis—"so far, so good."

Tuesday 4th Walked with Lewis to an observatory to see the Island, & then across to see marks of the great hurricane in 1846, Oct. 11th. Saw on the way some large banana trees in a garden, some queer wild fig trees, also the gum-eleme, the cocoa-nut, the papaw, the tamarind & many others for the first time.—the weather is warm enough for thin clothes, though a Norther' has blown all day.

Wednesday 5th Found an old mule standing in the water before breakfast & sketched him vid. p. 27th & at nine o'clock took the boat & stood over to Sand Key, throwing my breakfast on the way. The island is the queerest place imaginable, without a vegetable of any kind, with a hole in the centre dug for the lighthouse, where the tide ebbs and flows.—Lewis has quite a nice house & fittings, & we lived well—The pelicans are abundant about there and one was shot for a youngster who went out with

⁴These sketches, like those in footnote 8, were either water color, pencil, or sepia-wash.

⁵Courtesy, Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum, Joseph Downs Manuscript Collection, No. 69 x 206.1, pp. 27-29.

us as bird collector—Saw plenty of sardines caught, & examined the iron work.

Thursday 6th Fried the sardines & found them excellent & at noon saw Greupper & snappers & ate the latter—good—P.M. sketched vid. p. 26th Cook's house.

Friday 7th Came up & P.M. began the sketch of a curious wild pig.

Sunday 9th To Church & heard pastor Adams, a Puseyite;⁶ the people looked very well, with an air of more style than our country congregations—some rather pretty. After church Lewis saw his schooner come in & was soon in a nice pucker.

Monday 10th Went after breakfast to see them land cattle from a little vessel, which brings them over from the main, & a queer sight enough it was; they are hauled out by the horns, & come up all spread out—I then sketched on a block of gum-elleme tree near the barracks, & P.M. commenced sketching vid. p. 28th the house & cocoa-nut trees.—Even^g Capt. Howland & Mrs. Hackley here—supped on oysters.

Tuesday 11th Visited Hackley to make arrangements—Sketched in colours.

Wednesday 12th A wreck came in & prevented Hackley from going, and I was obliged to borrow a little sail-boat from Tift, & started with Williams at noon—we had a delightful sail among the Keys, and landed at five at Henry Gager's, & found his old negro Bob there—Walked out and examined the lagoons, found nothing to shoot, & supped on fried pork & cold sweet potatoes; turned in on an old stretcher, with a stool to keep my legs from going through — Waked up cold once or twice, but did well enough.

Thursday 13th Roused up Billy at daybreak, & found the nigger off, & after breakfast lost some time in searching for a piece of gold I dropped between the cracks of the floor; found it, made a sketch vid. p. 29th of Gager's house, & started. Passed through Bocca Chica with the North East trade, shot at a Comorant on the way & came in to Key West in two hours & a half—Lewis was here, & took me in the even^g to a party given to Governir Brown by Mr. Wall, which ended by nearly all the men getting

⁶Rev. C. C. Adams had St. Paul's Protestant Episcopal Church, Key West, from 1846 to March, 1855. When he left, there were 102 communicants, 30-40 candidates for confirmation. See Walter C. Maloney, *A Sketch of the History of Key West, Florida: Facsimile Reproduction 1876 Edition* (Gainesville, 1968), p. 33. Edward B. Pusey (1800-82) was a central figure in the Catholic revival (Oxford Movement) within the Church of England. See James Hastings, ed., *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, X (New York, 1955), 517-20.

fiddled in Champagne, singing a wrecking song, & toasting a wreck a week.⁷ 2 o'clock.

Friday 14th Finished my wild fig-tree. Even^s Mr. & Mrs. Campbell here.

Saturday 15th Hunted Billy Williams in conjunction with Capt. Curtis;—having run him down we took Clapp's boat & went to Sand Key; Mr. Lewis was actively engaged in superintending, & in the even^s the new apparatus was up—come home in a brilliant moonlight, with just breeze enough to bring us in to the wharf.

Sunday 16th A good sermon from Mr. Adams. Even^s to the Lancaster's with Lewis.

Monday 17th Finished the gum-elemi, & called at Wall's, where Miss Elisa told some queer stories. P.M. made a sketch, vid. 30th of a part of the town, Tufts look-out, & while waiting for the Isabel. The boat did not arrive till 12 o'clock & we had a boisterous passage. Mr. Mallory & Dr. Pinckney, Misses Brown, Ward, Tripplett on board.

The artist spent several weeks in Northeast Florida in April and early May of 1854 and made seven sketches: "Palatka—scrub palmetto, house, natives"; "Palatka—Country wagons, mules, buildings on Lake George"; "Palatka—Part of banks of Lake George"; "Palatka—Cattle range on prairie"; "Palatka—Tent at edge of lake 'Camp hunt'"; "St. Augustine—Old Spanish gate"; and "St. Augustine—Water side view, street, Old Spanish fort."⁸ He spent much of the time on fishing trips but also was pleasantly entertained at the Lynch and Gillis Tavern in Palatka, observed a gun fight in Jacksonville, and enjoyed a comfortable room at the Florida Hotel, St. Augustine, before leaving for Savannah on the steamer St. John's. Both the diary and sketches evoke nostalgia for antebellum Florida. Slavery, misery and political discord scarcely appear. There is only beauty.

Bartlett C. Jones

Asst. Professor of History & Social Sciences
University of Florida

⁷For accounts of the amoral Key West wrecking business, which involved more than 20 vessels with a gross of better than one-million dollars annually in the antebellum period, see: Louise V. White and Nora K. Smiley, *History of Key West* (St. Petersburg, 1959), pp. 33-36; anonymous, "Wrecks, Wrecking, Wreckers, and Wreckees on Florida Reef," *Hunt's Merchant's Magazine* (April 1842), pp. 349-54; and Kenneth Scott, "The City of Wreckers: Two Key West Letters of 1838," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, XXV (October 1946), 191-201.

⁸All sketches labelled Palatka did not necessarily depict that community. The "Old Spanish fort" in St. Augustine was, of course, the *Castillo de San Marcos*.