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Manifest Disney

An exhaustive, sometimes disheartening chronicle of the rogues, connivers, hypocrites, scoundrels and thieves in Floridian history.

By *Edward Kosner*
March 15, 2013 2:48 pm ET

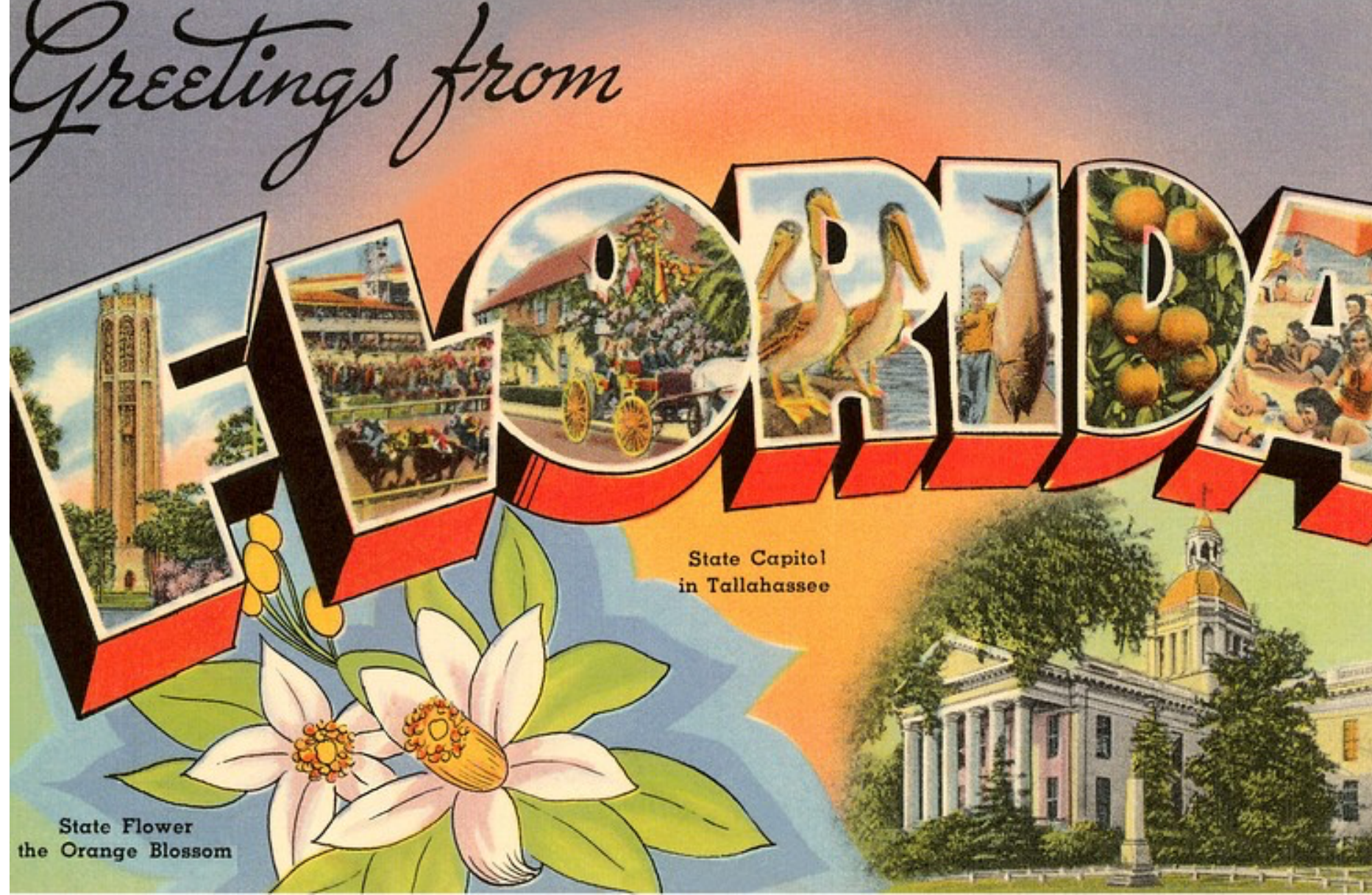
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'A fearful fraud,' Henry James called the place in 1904, "a ton of dreary jungle and swamp and misery of flat forest monotony to an ounce or two of little coast perching place—a few feet wide between the jungle and the sea."

The state's song, "The Swanee River (Old Folks at Home)," a slave's dialect lament for his beloved lost plantation, was composed by a Yankee who never glimpsed the Swanee on which there never were any plantations or nostalgic slaves. One celebrated 19th-century governor's bright idea was to drain its primordial wetlands. Another wanted the U.S. Army to evict every black in the state. Pioneer developer Henry Flagler went into hock to build a railroad 125 miles over the open Atlantic to a far-off islet only to have successive hurricanes wash it away.

FINDING FLORIDA

By *T.D. Allman*
Atlantic Monthly Press, 556 pages, \$27.50



CORBIS

That state is, of course, Florida, for five centuries the beckoning frontier of first European and then American yearning. Sparsely peopled by bedraggled settlers in the mid-18th century, it is today the fourth most populous state in the union, with more than 19 million polyglot citizens and 29 electoral votes, more than 10% of those needed to elect a president, as Al Gore can never forget.

How it got that way is the subject of T.D. Allman's tangy, aphoristic, if mildly disheartening book "Finding Florida." If there is a rogue, conniver, hypocrite, scoundrel, thief, liar, scalawag or race-baiter left unrecognized in Mr. Allman's dense chronicle, the author must have nodded off for a rare moment while buried in the sandy archives.

The tale of Ponce de Leon's quixotic quest for the fountain of youth, Mr. Allman points out, was concocted in the 1820s by Washington Irving, the creator of Rip Van Winkle. Far from discovering the Mississippi in 1542, Hernando de Soto's main claim to fame was lending his name nearly 400 years later to a now-extinct Chrysler family sedan. Andrew Jackson was a bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser who tried to rid the state of all Indians to make way for slavery. So disreputable are most of Mr. Allman's cast of characters that a few carpetbaggers—Northerners operating in Florida during Reconstruction—emerge as heroes of a sort.

Geology shaped Florida's destiny. The conquistadors' El Dorado it could never be: Florida, Mr. Allman is bound, not only has no gold; it is the only state where no metals at all are to be found. Instead, a spine of tough, porous limestone runs the length of the state, just off the east coast. "Even more than a recumbent alligator," he writes, "Florida geologically speaking resembles a gigantic, fossilized sponge. Water, instead of eroding it or moving it, percolates through it." But in the 20th century, technology—refrigeration!—changed the game. The terrain was still unforgiving, but air conditioning made the place livable—unless, of course, you built your dream house over a sinkhole.

So: "Florida is the Play-Doh State. Take the goo, mold it to your dreams. Then watch the dream ooze back into goo. People are constantly ruining Florida; Florida is constantly ruining them back. For at least five hundred years that has been Florida's defining theme— whoever the protagonists are, whatever their dream, whatever flag they wave."

And there have been plenty of soggy banners. After the early forays by the Spanish, the French established two bases near present-day Jacksonville and St. Augustine, only to be slaughtered by a Spanish force in 1565. The Spanish brought European diseases that decimated the local Indians, then kidnapped the survivors as slaves to work the Mexican gold mines. The English swept through in the early 18th century, but the Spanish held on long enough to be euchred out of the state by a succession of American presidents, starting with the wily Thomas Jefferson, who were determined to have the Floridas, as they were called, which had fallen outside the Louisiana Purchase.

Indeed, Jefferson and successors James Madison, James Monroe, John Quincy Adams and Andrew Jackson are stars in Mr. Allman's Florida hall of shame. "What drove these revered Americans to illegality," he writes, "was that the United States could find no way, as Jefferson put it, for Florida to be 'rightfully obtained.'" By hook and multiple crooks—and, under Madison, by America's first foray into covert operations—the deed was done.

One of the most farcical chapters took place on Amelia Island, the beautiful Atlantic barrier beach where I live, just across the St. Mary's River from Georgia. In 1811, President Madison secretly dispatched a disgraced Georgia pol and land speculator named George Mathews to secure Florida for the U.S. After a year's boondoggling, Mathews and a force of nine irregulars talked the nine Spanish defenders of the island into ceding it to America, a meaningless swap that neither country recognized. The next year, he failed to capture the impregnable Spanish citadel at St. Augustine and promptly died.

Mathews's shambolic caper eventually gave way to what Mr. Allman calls Andrew Jackson's "reign of terror." After his bloody victory over the British at New Orleans, which marked the end of the War of 1812, Gen. Jackson swept eastward. In Florida, his men massacred a peaceable farming community of Indians, free blacks and mulattoes at a place called Fort Negro. Ultimately, Old Hickory would drive Florida's Indians west on the Trail of Tears and open their land and the rest of the state for slavery.

"Finding Florida" is essentially an unending litany of white "ethnic cleansing" of the original Floridians and merciless abuse of the black slaves imported to work the land. Mr. Allman calls the three-stage Seminole Wars from 1814 to 1858 "a pogrom" and "America's first great counterinsurgency war." Like the massacre at Fort Negro and the later holocaust at the black town of Rosewood, most of the dark chapters of the "Americanization" of Florida have been expunged from popular memory and obscured in the historical record, Mr. Allman complains, replaced by fairy tales about sleepy time down South.

Amid all this cruelty and chicanery, the author does manage to find a handful of heroes. They are invariably liberals for their times who fought racism and tried to return Florida to its prelapsarian comity.

One is Zephaniah Kingsley, a Quaker who ran his northeast Florida plantations in the first half of the 19th century with his African wife, Anna, whom he had bought when she was a teenage slave in Havana. Kingsley believed that interracial sex was "socially, culturally and hygienically desirable" and would eventually result in a free mixed-race society that would be Florida's salvation. Two other heroes are Harrison Reed and Ossian Hart, governors who ruled during the so-called congressional Reconstruction that briefly overturned the racist regimes installed under Andrew Johnson after Lincoln's assassination. And in the 20th century, there is Claude Pepper, the populist senator during the New Deal who went on to serve many years in the House pushing benefits for Florida's swelling horde of retirees.

But these luminaries are the exception. Mr. Allman finds another group of culprits in the Florida real-estate buccaneers whose schemes are ultimately responsible for the Florida most Americans are familiar with today.

One of the first was David Levy, who is revered by most folk on Amelia Island as the founder of its picturesque port town of Fernandina Beach. Levy, a Moroccan Jew from the Caribbean who changed his last name to Yulee and converted to Christianity, built the state's first railroad across the peninsula, using public money. A pro-slaver, he got himself named U.S. senator, went to prison after the Civil War for backing the Confederacy, and died broke—in New York.

The other great railroad impresario, Henry Flagler, envisioned St. Augustine as a sunny haven for the rich of the Gilded Age and built a gigantic hotel there in 1888. But St. Augustine could be inconveniently chilly, and Flagler knew he had to head further south. On one scouting expedition, he spotted a grove of palms growing in the sandy soil, trees not native to Florida that had sprouted from a batch of coconuts from a boat that had foundered off Cuba. So was born Palm Beach, where today Donald Trump likes to swat golf balls on his own palm-shaded course.

And then there is Florida's most triumphant real-estate operator, [Walt Disney](#). Mr. Allman wryly tells the story of how Disney interests used shadow companies, shrewd legal maneuvering and a compliant state legislature to take absolute control of the 47 square miles of central Florida wasteland that became Disney World and turned the Orlando area into an El Dorado of amusement.

It's hard to fault the diligence with which Mr. Allman has assembled his factual account and the fluency with which he has written it. Yet his relentless focus on the dark side of Florida's history can leave the reader demoralized, with the nagging intuition that he has occasionally orange-picked the record. In any case, it's fair to say that no one can read his book and ever again think of Florida as the blessed, sun-soaked paradise of resilient myth.

Mr. Kosner, a Florida transplant, is the former editor of Newsweek, New York, Esquire and the New York Daily News.



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