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Pioneer Florida: A Photographic Essay

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The presence of the frontier has long been regarded as a major force in American history. As early as the 1890s, the historian Frederick Jackson Turner formalized the ideas felt by many into a concrete thesis that the existence of a frontier had contributed to the character of both Americans and their brand of democracy. The frontier was responsible for lawlessness, coarseness and restlessness, but also for rugged individualism and a belief in freedom. Many of these traits were characteristics of early pioneers on the Florida frontier. To complete the parallel with the American West, Florida had its own Indians, and soon had its own cowboys.

Life was harsh for the earliest settlers, as they attempted to carve an existence from Florida’s wilderness. The sea and navigable rivers were the major means of communication throughout the nineteenth century, for the railroads were slow to reach South Florida’s cities. Tampa’s link with the outside world until 1884 was the sea, as the closest rail link was at Cedar Keys. The roads were mostly trails which often washed away in the torrential rainstorms that came all too frequently to a land that was often swampy in the best of weather. When sea links were cut off, as during quarantine periods or hurricanes, a town worried about its food supplies, for at no time was it possible to be totally self-sufficient without serious harm to the body. Some west coast pioneers managed to make a good living for themselves by 1860, even to the point where many owned slaves. Many combined a profession with farming such as two local methodist preachers who owned both slaves and land in 1860. Most of the wealthiest people owned large areas of land, and many owned stores or ships. The opening of the cattle trade with Cuba made several, including Captain James McKay of Tampa and Jacob Summerlin of Polk County, prosperous by the 1870s. Some entrepreneurs experimented with different crops and methods of production, while turpentine and timber gave others income from clearing the virgin forests.

Florida’s unique environment led to its early reputation as the nation’s health resort, and by the 1880s, tourism was becoming a major source of income. To the pioneer families in the interior, however, the climate contributed to life’s harshness. Women and children were particularly at its mercy. Doctors were few and far between, and the long hours at work making soap and candles, as well as the usual tasks associated with the housewife’s lot, made a woman old before her time, if she was fortunate enough to survive childbirth after childbirth. Insects, snakes, strange animals and reptiles, all made life a constant terror for the more nervous of both sexes.

By the time photographers were busy capturing the past on film in this part of the world, many major changes were taking place. Life remained primitive for the poorer white “cracker” families and blacks. Very few Seminole Indians remained, and those were seen as picturesque anachronisms whom tourists wanted posed for a quaint souvenir photograph. The photographer’s emphasis was not on capturing everyday life on film, but in making pictures that could be sold. A photographer carried about one hundred pounds of gear with him wherever he went, and the equipment cost money. The earlier cameras needed a fairly long exposure time, so that a picture was carefully composed in advance, and this factor accounts for the stem expressions and stiff
poses of the early portraits. More importantly, the events recorded were events that the photographer, or the person who commissioned him, wished to have recorded. Thus, there are many that show imposing homes, new business premises, or a very affluent-looking family group. Pictures of blacks, poor whites or Indians doing normal daily tasks are exceptions. Many photos are a tribute to hunting or fishing skills.

Nevertheless, a great deal can be learned from the old photographs that lie hidden in attics or are preserved in local museums and libraries. Some are tributes to the founders of our cities as they imposed order on the wilderness. Sometimes an incidental factor in a photograph can tell more than the original purpose of the photographer. These old pictures of days gone by are important historical documents, and people with old family pictures should look at their collections and write down what person or event is depicted there before it is forgotten. So many photos are thrown out when a local museum would delight in seeing them preserved as a part of a town’s past. Even if you do not wish to donate a family album to your local museum or library, let them know what you possess, for it may help others recreate the past.
The sea was the route that brought most of the early settlers to Florida. Higells wharf at the foot of Main Street in Sarasota is shown here around the year 1900. From the town’s founding in 1886 to 1902, when the Florida West Shore Railroad was extended to Sarasota, this dock was the town’s link with the outside world.

Photograph courtesy of the Sarasota County Historical Archives.

Henry Plant supplemented his railroad interests with a steamship line. The Margaret was a Plant Line excursion steamer often chartered for trips to Mullet Key, Egmont Key and points on the Manatee River. It could accommodate one thousand persons, and according to the Tampa Morning Tribune, such a trip cost one dollar for adults and fifty cents for children in 1898.

Photograph courtesy of the USF Special Collections.
Few structures have survived Florida’s environment from the days of the Indian wars. However, roadside markers remind us of the time when forts were erected as the white man responded to the Seminole Indians’ attempt to retain their independence and culture. Fort Carroll was a temporary stockade near the town known today as Bartow.

Photograph courtesy of author.

Fort Brooke, Tampa’s forerunner, was known to soldiers in the days of the Seminole wars as a healthful, pleasant base under the shade of magnificent oak trees. It became the leading hospital for the inland garrisons in the 1840s. The former officers’ quarters are shown here in the 1890s.

Photograph courtesy of USF Special Collections.
By the 1890s, house styles in Florida varied considerably. This photograph from the Stokes Collection shows a typical “cracker” shanty, built of logs and rough-sawn pine with a mud chimney.

Photograph courtesy of the USF Special Collections.

Some Floridians could afford spectacular homes by 1896, such as this house in Tarpon Springs. It was owned by the Reverend S. B. Currie, who must surely have had a private source of income.

Photo courtesy of the USF Special Collections.
This photograph shows a typical home of a fairly well-to-do family in the central area of South Florida in 1897. The home belonged to the old Skipper family of Avon Park in Highlands County.

Photograph courtesy of the Avon Park Museum.

Except for the trees in the center of the road, this photograph could be of a frontier town in the “wild west.” It dates from the 1880s and shows South Broadway in Bartow, looking north from Summerlin Street.

Photograph courtesy of the Polk County Historical Commission.
Central Avenue, St. Petersburg’s main street, around 1896. Founded in 1888, St. Petersburg already had many of the attributes of a city, including a drug store and general market visible in this picture. Down the deeply-rutted street can be seen a turret, which was part of the Hotel Detroit.

Photograph from the Stokes Collection, USF Special Collections.

Growth and promotion of isolated areas often depended on the local newspaper. This 1899 photograph shows the home of the Sarasota Times on lower Main Street, with the owner, C. V. S. Wilson and his wife at the entrance. Constructed in 1886, this building served as office and print shop until 1911.

Photograph courtesy of the Sarasota County Historical Archives.
Another sign of advancement was the founding of a local bank. Often pioneer ingenuity was needed to set up the establishment. The Polk County Bank, organized in 1886 at Bartow, used oxen to bring in its safe on a flat cart pulled on temporary rails.

Photograph courtesy of the Polk County Historical Commission.

It took eight yoke of oxen to move this huge boiler through Avon Park to a local sawmill during the last decade of the nineteenth century. In the background is the First National Bank, which failed in 1929.

Photograph courtesy of the Avon Park Museum.
The coming of the railroad was a major boost to towns along the lines. This is the Orange Belt Railroad’s station at Clearwater around the turn of the century, with a train just pulling into the station.

Photograph courtesy of the USF Special Collections.

Many small communities were not served by a railroad until well into the twentieth century. Despite the efforts of local leaders, Avon Park had to import its tourists and goods and export its local products by road as far as Fort Meade, which had been reached by rail in 1885. Here a load of local pineapples is pulled by oxen.

Photograph courtesy of the Avon Park Museum.
Avon Park’s sawmill owner, J. C. Burleigh, needed a way to haul logs to his mill. He built his own railroad of hard pine tracks, and bought an old locomotive which he had shipped from Tennessee by rail to Bowling Green, and from there by flat cars on planks. Its maiden voyage in Avon Park was an occasion for a civic celebration on December 22, 1894.

Photograph courtesy of the Avon Park Museum.

The Sarasota House was built in 1886 as a boarding house at Five Points on Main Street in Sarasota. At the time of this 1902 photo, it was known as the Vincent House. The photo’s original caption read “Whitaker mules.”

Photograph courtesy of the Sarasota County Historical Archives.
By the 1880s, Florida was becoming known as a tourist area, especially for invalids. This photo from the Stokes collection is of an excursion dated around 1896.

Photograph courtesy of the USF Special Collections.

The Verona Hotel at Avon Park was built by the town’s founder and publicizer, Oliver M. Crosby. He offered special rates to prospective settlers, who traveled by steamer to Jacksonville, by rail to Fort Meade and finally by road to Avon Park. The hotel was completed in the fall of 1889 and became the center of the town’s social life. Remodeled as the Avon Hotel in 1919, it burned completely in February, 1927.

Photograph courtesy of the Avon Park Museum.
Prospective settlers pose for a publicity shot, showing the size of the local fruits.

Photograph courtesy of the Avon Park Museum.

This 1890s photograph is of a well-tended young orange grove in central Florida.

Photograph from the Stokes Collection, USF Special Collections.
Bananas were among the exotic crops grown in South Florida at the turn of the century.

Photograph courtesy of USF Special Collections.

A “pinery” near St. Petersburg: “Enclosed and partially shaded from the sun by trellis, the fruit thus raised grows very much larger, more sweet and tender, and brings greatly increased prices,” according to Facts ... of the Pinellas Peninsular, published in 1896 in Philadelphia.

Photograph courtesy of USF Special Collections.
In the early days of Florida’s history, hunting and fishing were essential skills if one were to eke out a living from the land, but by the 1890s, the more affluent locals were regarding them as leisure activities, as this well dressed hunter shows.

Photograph courtesy of the Avon Park Museum.

Many tourists were lured by Florida’s abundant fish and game. There was no limit on the number of animals that could be taken or on the number of fish caught. This dapper gentleman has returned from a successful sport fishing jaunt, and is justifiably proud of the magnificent tarpon that he caught.

Photograph from the Stokes Collection, USF Special Collections.
Many wealthy gentlemen, such as Judge John H. Caldwell of Tennessee, came yearly to Florida to hunt with friends. A hunting trip did not have to mean hardship or deprivation. In addition to folding chairs and tables, this picture of a 1901 expedition near La Belle shows the black cook, Randolph Hawkins, who went along to take care of the domestic arrangements.

Photograph courtesy of the Caloosa Valley Historical Society.

Early photographs usually show blacks only incidentally and often in menial capacities. This picture of a black family was taken around 1900 and features a typical log cabin built for a family at Hagan’s turpentine still, located south of Avon Park in Highlands County.

Photograph courtesy of the Avon Park Museum.
This group picture from around 1908 brought together the phosphate-processing crew at the Tiger Bay mine, west of Fort Meade in Polk County.

Photograph courtesy of the Polk County Historical Commission.

The one-room school house had to serve the education needs of remote areas. Here the Polk Lake pupils posed with their teacher, Minnie York, around 1910.

Photograph courtesy of the Polk County Historical Commission.
Holidays provided an occasion for early settlers to gather together. On Thanksgiving Day, 1894, Oliver M. Crosby of Avon Park entertained the town’s residents with dinner at his Verona Hotel.

Photograph courtesy of the Avon Park Museum.

Old graves, such as this one at the site of Fort Kissimmee on the present-day Avon Park Bombing Range, are poignant reminders of the bad old days of high infant mortality and high death rates as a result of childbirth. Many of the older markers record the family name, preceded by the word “baby” or “infant.”

Photograph courtesy of the author.
Selected Bibliography


