

# PROLOGUE

Sometime in the next century or two, the sea will cover Florida as it has periodically for the past 250 million years, and sometime, assuredly, the sea will retreat, leaving a peninsula dotted with lakes and marshes, ringed by a new beach of glistening sand. It is an anomalous land, jutting southward like a thumb splayed from the North American mainland. Shielded by barrier islands and caressed on its southeast flank by the Gulf Stream, the peninsula divides the Gulf of Mexico from the Atlantic Ocean and brings the North American mainland in touch with the tropics. Strange and exotic to all who encounter it, Florida is fast becoming a victim of its allure, with 300,000 people a year rushing to make it their home and another 44 million coming to visit. This book is an examination of the natural state, which, although poorly used by its human inhabitants, continues to prove irresistible.

In human terms, Florida is as much a state of mind as of being, a land of imagination where fantasies come true, although the nature of the dreams, like the land itself, has changed with shifting social fashions. Now tourists arrive to visit the Magic Kingdom of Walt Disney World or to view the trained porpoises and whales of Sea World, whereas a century ago they came to cruise rivers, coast the shore, and visit resorts built around wondrous springs. In these past one hundred years, man has reshaped and relandscaped the peninsula, leveling forests, draining its marshes. The process continues at such a rapid rate that many residents of more than a decade barely recognize the areas around their homes.

The tale of Florida's development is often sordid, marked by the greed of people intent on taking whatever the land offered and leaving nothing in return, yet it is leavened by men and women who found the place special and called it paradise. Their love and respect are responsible for the preservation of what remains of the natural state. Without their diligence, there would be only artificial playgrounds attempting to imitate wilderness.

This study begins late in the last century when the state's leadership pursued a policy of resource exploitation and development for the economic gain of a few individuals and corporations. The greatest of the capitalist investors in Florida during this period was Henry Flagler, the partner of John D. Rockefeller in the Standard Oil Company and the founder of the Florida East Coast Railway. Investing his own fortune, Flagler laid his tracks 522 miles down the Atlantic coast of the peninsula from Jacksonville to Key West, joining that island city to the mainland for the first time. Along the way he built hotels and cities that defined resort living at the turn of the century.

Flagler and his contemporaries—among them Hamilton Disston, who once laid claim to a third of the state, and Henry Plant, who developed resorts and constructed railroads from Jacksonville across the peninsula's midsection to Tampa—literally carved up the state. The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries also witnessed the birth of modern citriculture, of commercial production of vegetables for the winter market, and of phosphate mining; the full and grotesque flowering of the logging and naval stores industries; the first campaigns to drain the Everglades; and the beginnings of mass tourism. The same era set patterns of population growth and urban development in the state and triggered the earliest calls for conservation of natural resources. Americans began to lust after Florida real estate as if it were gold. That craving resulted in a real estate boom that, when it went bust, threw the state into economic collapse. The first section of the book ends with those bizarre events.

Before shifting to an account of developments over the past six decades, the narrative looks at what existed prior to development, going back 250 million years to the beginning of the landmass now known as the Floridan Plateau and proceeding to the eve of the Flagler period. Individual chapters examine the peninsula's evolution through the appearance of Paleo-hunters 15,000 to 20,000 years ago, and the unique cultures of pre-Columbian tribes and their fate at the hands of European conquerers. William Bartram, the brilliant and eccentric botanist from Philadelphia whose *Travels* is required reading for all who would understand the state, journeyed through much of Florida during the time of British rule in the 1770s, before humans thoroughly transformed it. His descriptions of the flora and fauna and of the Indians just then coming to be known as the

Seminole are unexcelled—as are his paintings from the period. Following the discussion of Bartram are sections on the American seizure of Florida and the campaign—known as the Seminole Wars—to obliterate colonies of free blacks and extirpate the Indian; and on plantation slavery, the Civil War, and Reconstruction. The focus, as throughout the book, is on the land and its inhabitants.

The final four chapters review the events of the last six decades, from the Great Depression through the present, when even the state's most avid promoters recognize that it suffers from too many people, too much trash and pollution, too few parks, schools, roads, and other public amenities. The severity of the state's problems has repeatedly forced its leaders to adopt legislation to protect the environment, especially water and wildlife. Yet too often those laws have proved inadequate to the task, and the state has remained a victim of its popularity. Looming over the state's growth during the past two decades is Walt Disney World in central Florida, and the last chapter deals with both its impact and the different responses to it.

Politicians appear only as their actions have materially affected the look and feel of the land and water. During the nearly 170 years of American possession of Florida, state officials have been most noteworthy for their eagerness to give away or sell for a pittance the natural endowments of the peninsula whose stewardship they claimed as their duty. Those few elected officials who have worked on behalf of preservation have distinguished themselves for their courage and foresight more than for their lasting accomplishments. In addition to the politicians, there are government workers—national, state, regional, and local—who have dedicated their lives to Florida, keeping their faith in its potential through times of hostile as well as friendly leadership. Through their reports, interviews, and educational programs, they have taught Floridians about the need to nurture their unique environment.