

The New River Mystique

As rivers go, the New River is most unpretentious, a placid waterway with two branches that meander eastward from their source in the Everglades to converge at a point about three miles from the Atlantic Ocean. Yet the name still conjures up numerous colorful and contrasting images: pristine tropical beauty and savage bloodshed, Indian traders and northern tourists, pirate ships and sleek racing yachts. To the river over time came explorers, soldiers, adventurers, and energetic, sturdy souls hoping to carve out a future in the subtropical wilderness. The New River has wielded a magnetic, sometimes mystical, influence over residents and visitors to south Florida for centuries. Its image remains a powerful one that is not likely to diminish.

No one knows the origin of the river's name or that of its first visitor. A number of geographers have identified as the New River the Río Salado on the Freducci map of 1514–15, which drew upon the Ponce de León expedition for its data.¹ This led one historian to conclude that the famous Spanish explorer may have skirted or actually entered the New River inlet as it existed in 1513.² As early as 1631 the map *America Septentrionalis* located R. Nova above the Bay of Biscayne.³ Spanish explorer Antonio de Arredondo, who identified the coastal rivers and inlets of Florida, labeled the river “R Neubo” on his 1742 map.⁴ Thus the name was clearly established on European maps by the mid-eighteenth century.

One local tradition attributes the name to an Indian legend that New River appeared overnight, during torrential rains “when the earth was

trembling.” Perhaps such an eruption did occur in prehistory, and the river may have existed as an underground stream eons ago. There were also tales that the river was “bottomless” in some parts. Late-nineteenth-century accounts do confirm the existence of strong whirlpools that sucked objects into subterranean passages, the flow from which was discharged ultimately as springs along the shore or in the Atlantic Ocean. Geologically, the river is a nonalluvial effluent of that unique natural phenomenon, the Florida Everglades. Prior to state drainage programs begun early in the twentieth century, the rocky base of the Everglades formed a huge holding basin that filled with rainfall, and the flowage moved slowly southward from Lake Okeechobee to the Florida Straits. The basin was higher than sea level, and over time the accumulating waters cut through the soft limestone of the coastal ridge at points, forming “rivers” that drained to the sea.

One surveyor, Marcellus Williams, wrote in his 1870 field notes, “New River both forks is a very deep Stream and Navigable to the rim of the Everglades. As you ascend the River towards the Everglades, there are deep Caverns in the Coral Rock from which the Water makes with great force, so much so as nearly to prevent propelling a Boat with oars. The rim of the Everglades are shallow and so is the water after getting into it until you get out some 4 to 6 miles, New River Sound and Middle River are deep.”⁵ Charles Pierce, son of a pioneer south Florida family, also traveled to the river’s source and observed, “All the land hereabout was solid rock, and it became evident to me as I looked at it that at some time in the remote past there had been an earthquake that had opened this fissure from the Glades to the coast, making the channel now called New River. . . . Just at sundown we arrived at the end of the river. Here the water was pouring from the Everglades through a narrow channel and running so swiftly it taxed our strength to the utmost to paddle the old canoe through. When we reached the still water of the Glades we paused to eat.”⁶

The waters of the New River always sought an opening on south Florida’s ever-shifting coastline. Over the centuries natural forces opened and closed inlets along the coast in random fashion.⁷ Littoral drift along the lower east coast transported sand southward, depositing it in the inlets. Tropical storms and nor’easters also battered and weakened the shoreline,

closing inlets and opening others where none existed previously. Torrential rains piled up water in the Glades that had to find an outlet. Thus the New River inlet has been changed frequently by the whims of nature, as numerous maps attest. In the past such occurrences were viewed as acts of God; now they are attributed to hydrostatic pressure, littoral drift, beach erosion, and other environmental factors.

Following the French and Indian War (1756–63), Great Britain took possession of East and West Florida, and William Gerard De Brahm, surveyor-general for the southern colonies, was directed to make a survey of the coastline south of Saint Augustine. In 1765 he witnessed the creation of “a new inlet” along the present-day shoreline of Broward County. His notes reported that the great rains of May “filled this River and its Marshes with so much water that its weight within and the Sea without by Force of the N. E. gales demolished the Bank and made this Inlet between 25th and 30th May 1765. 17 common miles to the No. of this Inlet is a fine fresh water Spring issuing out of a Rock upon the Beach.”⁸ Accompanying De Brahm on his survey of the Florida coastline as a deputy surveyor was Bernard Romans, who became so enthralled with “The Floridas” that he subsequently spent several years conducting more detailed explorations on his own. Although De Brahm’s notes were not compiled for publication until many years later, in 1775 the Dutch-born Romans reported, “5 miles to the south of Rio Seco is another point of rocks, and south of it a small bite, and a half a mile further is the mouth of the *Rio Nuevo*, which is about G of a mile wide and generally open but shallow, here Jew-fish are very abundant both within and without the river.”⁹ No early observer was more lavish in his appraisal of Florida than Romans. He described in detail its climate, flora, fauna, and possibilities for development, especially in agriculture. He forecast that Florida could become a “seat of trade” on the North American continent despite the presence of mosquitoes, the discomfort of heat and humidity, and its flooded conditions during the rainy seasons. Despite the enthusiasm of Romans and others who viewed the New River and south Florida as having great potential, the region suffered from its wild and lawless reputation. Francis Fatio, writing an economic report in 1790 to be used by the Spanish government for establishing commercial policy, found that the whole East Florida province was good for the growing of sugarcane and cotton; but he cautioned, “no

people settled in those localities, no one ventures to risk his negroes and property to the inroad of the Indians, pirates, and rogues from the Bahamas who infest all these coasts.”¹⁰

The transfer of Florida from Great Britain to Spain at the end of the American Revolution failed to usher in an era of tranquility. Some British subjects were not eager to be uprooted from their homes or submit to Spanish rule. They faced financial losses in disposing of their property and moving to areas under British control. A number of English sympathizers adopted disruptive tactics, including William August Bowles, a former Loyalist officer from Maryland with business ties in the Bahamas. In 1788 Bowles attempted to foment an insurrection by Florida Indians, which the Spaniards quickly quelled.¹¹ The knowledge that English sympathizers in Florida were a potential source of trouble prompted the Spanish government to send a secret mission to New River in 1793. Under the pretext of seeking fresh water at New River for a ship ostensibly en route to Havana, the mission sought information on the activities of another Englishman, Surla (sometimes called Charles) Lewis, and his four grown sons. Formerly associated with Bowles, Lewis was reportedly living in Florida and possibly serving as a foreign agent to the Indians.

Sebastian Verezaluze, an emissary of the Spanish governor of East Florida, commanded the mission to New River aboard the schooner *Juan Nepomuceno* and wrote a detailed account of the river's depth and navigability.¹² The Lewis family did indeed live there but was away on a month's trip to the Bahamas. Instead, the Spaniards found Joseph Robbins, a known confidant of Bowles, staying on New River and seeing to the Lewises' interests during the family's absence. "Robbins said that he had been there for five or six months, and that Mr. Lewis had lived in that house for several years, and that the latter had a plantation two miles to the west of this house. He also reported that Mr. Lewis had five horses which a certain Bowles had given him."¹³ Nothing further is known of Surla Lewis, whom the Spanish sought to spy on; nevertheless, the Verezaluze report provided the first written account of non-Indian occupation on New River.

Although the Lewis family subsequently moved to the Miami River region, they continued to claim landownership on New River for many years. By 1825 only six south Florida land claims from the Spanish period had been validated. Jonathan Lewis and his sister, Polly, held tracts on

the south side of the Miami River, while their mother secured a section on New River. Jonathan Lewis became justice of the peace at Cape Florida but later moved to Key West, where he resided for many years. His mother, Surla's widow Frankee Lewis, was at Cape Florida with her son on January 10, 1825, when she signed a deed selling the "Lewis Place" on New River to Solomon Snyder of New York, "with the buildings, orange, lime and coconut trees thereon."¹⁴ Snyder inexplicably began action on behalf of Frankee Lewis to acquire title to the 640-acre tract on New River, signing the necessary claim as "Agent for Frankee Lewis."¹⁵ An affidavit dated May 5, 1825, supporting the claim for the land grant, states "that he [Snyder] has known Frankee Lewis, the widow of Surla Lewis deceased to cultivate, occupy and possess for four years previous to the twenty second day of February in the year of our Lord One thousand eight Hundred and nineteen, the place known by the name of the 'Lewis Place' on New River."¹⁶ The claim was confirmed on December 31, 1825.

Apparently Snyder had no opportunity to exercise his ownership rights on New River, for he died around 1825 in Saint Augustine. His deed from Frankee Lewis was never recorded in Monroe County records, and it first came to light in 1870 in the files of the U.S. General Land Office in Washington. Despite having sold the property to Solomon Snyder in 1825, Frankee Lewis resold it five years later, on September 8, 1830, to Richard Fitzpatrick. The widow Lewis, who died sometime before 1835, thus created a tangle in the legal ownership of the property that remained unsettled until 1895.¹⁷

Other early settlers came to the New River, such as the colorful Odet Philippe. His background, like that of the Lewis family, is obscure. He claimed a personal friendship with Napoleon Bonaparte dating from their student days at a boarding school in Lyons, and he later received an appointment as a surgeon in the Napoleonic navy. Captured at the Battle of Trafalgar, he spent time in an English prison before making his way to the Bahamas, and ultimately settling in Charleston, South Carolina.¹⁸ Financial misfortunes in Charleston then reportedly led to Philippe's sojourn on New River, where he attempted the commercial production of salt from ocean water. The Frenchman arrived aboard his ship *The Ney* (named for Napoleon's marshal) in 1828, seven years after ratification of the Adams-Onís Treaty transferring Florida from Spain to the United States. Philippe's wife reportedly preferred an active social life, finding

Key West more to her liking. Census records reveal that Phillippe maintained a residence in Key West in 1830, and he served for a time as justice of the peace for Monroe County. Ties between Key West and the New River region were strong and contacts frequent, as Key West was the seat of federal government in south Florida. Phillippe maintained contact with the New River community for a number of years before moving to Tampa, where he died in 1869.

William Cooley from Maryland took up residence on New River in 1824, moving there from north Florida, where he first settled in about 1813.¹⁹ Cooley made his living primarily by processing arrowroot starch from the wild *zamia* root that grew abundantly in the region. He had perfected the Indian method of making the flour product, which they called *coontie*, at his water-powered mill on New River, and this profitable business is considered Broward County's first industry. He also lent an aura of legitimacy to the highly publicized "wrecking" business that flourished along the southeast Florida coastline. Wreckers made their living by salvaging the cargoes of merchant ships that foundered along the Florida coast. Many wreckers were accused of setting misleading signal fires to lure vessels onto reefs, where they could be exploited for salvage. Cooley, who made frequent trips to Key West, gained the respect of many, including Richard Fitzpatrick, a powerful territorial legislator. Fitzpatrick helped him secure appointment as justice of the peace for the New River settlement, serving the area from Cape Florida northward from 1831 to 1836. Fitzpatrick also exercised his considerable political clout to help bring about the creation of Dade County in 1836.

Richard Fitzpatrick, a forceful and influential figure, envisioned south Florida's future in terms of a flourishing plantation-based economy, and he promoted a system of connecting canals making inland navigation possible from the Saint Johns River south to Biscayne Bay. With a view toward bringing his dream to reality, Fitzpatrick purchased 2,600 acres—all of the privately owned property in southeast Florida save one small parcel on Key Biscayne. One of his holdings was the "Lewis Place" on New River, which he purchased in 1830. His friend William Cooley already lived on this tract but did not hold title. In 1832 Fitzpatrick described his new holdings: "The lands on the South Atlantic Coast of Florida consists of high Hammock, low Hammock, high marsh, low marsh, and pine barren. The growth of the high Hammock is principally live oak, Mulberry, red