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Description

Brief history of Flagler County, Florida collected by the Works Progress Administration's Historical Records Survey.

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- [Burden, W. Douglas](#)
- [Culting, Henry](#)
- [Flagler, Henry M.](#)
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- [Flagler County](#)
- [Bunnell](#)
- [Matanzas River](#)
- [Halifax River](#)
- [Atlantic Ocean](#)

Note to Researchers: Though the WPA field workers included extensive citations for the factual information contained in these county histories, it should be noted that these historical narratives were produced in the 1930s by federal government employees, and might reflect the inherent social biases of the era.

Historical Sketch of Flagler County

1. HISTORICAL SKETCH

Flagler county was created by act of the legislature of Florida on April 28, 1917, from the northern part of Volusia county and the southern part of St. Johns county. The territory comprising the county lay entirely within St. Johns county between 1822 and 1824. From the latter date until 1854 the southern portion was in Orange county, which was called Mosquito county until 1845; between 1845 and 1917 it was in Volusia county. The county was named in honor of Henry M. Flagler, an associate of Rockefeller in the Standard Oil Company, who came to Florida in 1883 and was instrumental in the development of the entire East Coast through his activities as builder and president of the Florida East Coast Railroad. Bunnell was made the county seat.

Although Flagler county is one of the newer counties of the state, the history of the territory which it now embraces is interwoven with the earliest history of Florida. Less than two months after the founding of St. Augustine, in 1565, Pedro Menendez de Aviles led an expedition of 150 men across this section to attack a colony of French who were building a fort at Canaveral. Evidences of French settlement are still found on the old Dupont place, in the northeast part of the county.

The first known settlement in this territory was made by the Franciscans, who established a mission about 26 miles south of St. Augustine early in the seventeenth century. The Franciscan fathers undertook to instruct the Indian braves in agriculture, but found them much opposed to manual labor, which they considered squaw's work. This and other early missions to the south were mere palmetto huts, but as the influence of the Franciscans increased Indian labor was used to construct substantial buildings of coquina stone. The missions in this section were destroyed by the Indians about the middle of the eighteenth century. The ruins of some of them can still be

seen; one is between the old King's Road and the canal that now connects the Matanzas and Halifax Rivers.

The first permanent settlers within the present limits of Flagler county removed into the territory in the early nineteenth century. Perhaps the earliest was John Russell, a wealthy planter from the Bahamas, who brought his family and slaves to St. Augustine in 1812, by way of Charleston, South Carolina. Russell traded the schooner in which he made the trip to the governor of the Province of East Florida for 4,000 acres of land, built a home on the grant, and engaged in the cultivation of sugarcane. He later sold the property to Charles W. Bulow, whose son, John, built on it the first pine coquina residence in the county and a sugar mill. Henry Culting and Joseph M. Hernandez were other early settlers. Culting, an Englishman, bought the Pellicer grant on Pellicer Creek. Hernandez, who was Florida's first territorial delegate to Congress, in 1817 secured a Spanish grant which included the site of the old Franciscan Mission. On his plantation, called San Jose, he cultivated sugarcane, which he manufactured into sugar in his own mill.

The early prosperity of this section was destroyed by the Seminole Indian War, which began in 1835. Not only did immigration cease, but the plantations that had been established were made untenable by Indian hostilities. In 1842, at the close of the War, Congress passed a temporary free homestead act to encourage settlement in the section that had been the seat of hostilities. All of the peninsula lying south of the line dividing townships nine and ten, south, which is now the northern boundary of Flagler county, was thrown open to homesteaders for one year under the terms of the Armed Occupation Act. In spite of this act and of the fact that the public lands were open to purchase at the regular price of \$1.25 an acre, settlement in the Flagler county area was slow for the next decade.

The section suffered another set-back during the War between the States, and it was not until the 1880's that any appreciable development again occurred. The St. Johns Railway Company was incorporated in 1881 to build a narrow gauge railroad from Rollestown in Putnam county to Daytona, by way of East Palatka and San Mateo. This railroad gave Bunnell, which had been founded by Alva A. Bunnell as a saw mill town in 1881, connection with St. Johns River transportation. It was soon linked with the Jacksonville, St. Augustine and Halifax River Railway, which was purchased by Henry M. Flagler in 1886, and with the St. Augustine and Palatka Railway, thus providing through connections between Bunnell and Jacksonville and the latter's deep water harbor.

Another improvement which increased the section's transportation facilities was the intracoastal canal connecting the Matanzas and Halifax Rivers, construction of which was begun in 1880 by the East Coast Canal and Transportation Company. Originally a toll canal, built under the supervision of Dr. John T. Westcott, the East Coast Canal has since been acquired and enlarged by the Federal Government.

Until the War between the States, sugarcane was the most important crop in the Flagler county area; citrus culture was important in the section's economy in the decades immediately following 1880. After the Florida freeze of 1894-5, Henry M. Flagler hurriedly shipped into East Coast counties, at his own expense, all manner of vegetable seeds and cuttings. The farmers in the Flagler county area discovered that their soil was ideally adapted to Irish potatoes, which are

now the principal money crop of the county, although general farming, dairying and livestock production are important. Irish potato acreage increased from 2,175 acres in 1929 to 3,124 acres in 1934, and the production increased from 260,364 bushels to 302,512 bushels. The greater part of the potato crop is marketed through an agricultural cooperative marketing association. Extensive drainage operations in recent years have made some of the best lands in the county available for agriculture.

Flagler county lies, in part, in the East Florida flatwoods region, and the lumbering and naval stores industries are of considerable importance in the county's economy. There are three naval stores plants and three lumber mills which cut annually about one million board feet, consisting mainly of longleaf and slash pine and some cypress. Some of the lumber is manufactured into barrel staves in a large mill at Bunnell. Also operating in the county are plants for the production of clay brick and cement and concrete products. A canning factory at Bunnell is said to be the only factory in the world that cans early Irish potatoes. Mineral resources of the county are coquina, marl, ocher, sand and large deposits of brick clay.

The clear waters of the Atlantic Ocean, which comprise the east boundary of Flagler county, have afforded optimum conditions for an unique scientific project on the coast about 18 miles south of St. Augustine. The Marine Studios, planned and developed by W. Douglas Burden and Count Ilia Tolstoy, includes the two largest aquaria in the world, where submarine life is presented under conditions that approximate as nearly as possible the actual ocean environment.

The first meeting of the board of county commissioners of Flagler county was held in Bunnell on the first Monday in July 1917, when arrangements were made for temporarily carrying on the county government. The Lambert Building was used as a courthouse, and served as such until a permanent courthouse was built in 1927.

The original boundaries of the county have not been changed. They are: "Commencing at a point on the extension of the township line being (between) townships nine and ten, south of range thirty-one, east, and immediately north of Summer Haven; thence southwesterly along an imaginary line extending from said point of beginning, to the mouth of Pellicer's creek; thence westerly along an imaginary line up the middle of Pellicer's creek to a point where said Pellicer's creek intersects the range line between township ten south of range thirty, east, and township ten south of range twenty-nine, east; thence south along said range line to the northeast corner of section twenty-four, township ten south of range twenty-nine, east; thence west along the section line between sections thirteen and twenty-four, fourteen and twenty-three, fifteen and twenty-two, sixteen and twenty-one, seventeen and twenty, eighteen and nineteen, in township ten south of range twenty-nine, east, and between sections thirteen and twenty-four, fourteen and twenty-three, fifteen and twenty-two, sixteen and twenty-one, seventeen and twenty, eighteen and nineteen, in township ten south of range twenty-eight, east, to a point where said section line intersects the eastern boundary line of Putnam county; thence south along said eastern boundary line of Putnam county to a point where the township line between townships eleven and twelve intersects the range line between twenty-seven and twenty-eight, east; thence down the middle of Crescent lake to the mouth of Haw creek where said Haw creek empties into said Crescent lake; thence along Haw creek following the boundary line between St. Johns and Volusia counties to the range line between ranges twenty-eight and twenty-nine; thence south along said range line

to the northwest corner of section thirty, township fourteen, range twenty-nine, east; thence east on the section line between sections nineteen and thirty, twenty and twenty-nine, twenty-one and twenty-eight, twenty-two and twenty-seven, twenty-three and twenty-six, twenty-four and twenty-five, in township fourteen south of range twenty-nine, east; and between sections nineteen and thirty, twenty and twenty-nine, twenty-one and twenty-eight, twenty-two and twenty-seven, twenty-three and twenty-six, twenty-four and twenty-five, in township fourteen south of range thirty, east; and between sections nineteen and thirty, twenty and twenty-nine, twenty-one and twenty-eight, twenty-two and twenty-seven, in township fourteen south of range thirty-one east to the northeast corner of said last numbered section twenty-seven; thence north along section line between sections twenty-two and twenty-three, fourteen and fifteen, ten and eleven, two and three, in township fourteen south of range thirty-one, east, and between sections thirty-four and thirty-five, twenty-six and twenty-seven, twenty-two and twenty-three, fourteen and fifteen, ten and eleven, two and three, to the northeast corner of said section three, in township thirteen south of range thirty-one, east; thence north-easterly along the boundary line of Volusia county to the Atlantic Ocean; thence northerly along the shores of the Atlantic Ocean to the point of beginning" (sec. 36, C. G. L.).

The population of Flagler county was 2,442 in 1920. Its population in 1935 was 3,179, of whom 1,480 were Negroes. The total acreage of the county is 364,429, of which 13,463 acres were in farms in 1930, 12,277 acres in 1935. The number of farms decreased from 144 in 1930 to 134 in 1935 and the value of farm lands and buildings decreased from \$927,125 to \$735,675 during the same period. The total assessed value of real estate in 1936 was \$991,630, of which \$681,500 was the assessed valuation of lands under tax certificates, not extended on the tax rolls, and \$44,610 was the assessed valuation of homestead exemptions. The taxable assessed valuation of real estate was \$265,520.

2. GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATION AND RECORDS SYSTEM

The first counties in Florida were created on July 21, 1821, at which time Andrew Jackson, as governor of East and West Florida, established Escambia and St. Johns counties by executive ordinance ("Historical (Preface)" to C. G. L., p. 4). Florida became a territory on March 30, 1822, and on August 12, 1822, the Legislative Council divided the territory into four counties, two in West Florida, called Escambia and Jackson, and two in East Florida, called Duval and St. Johns (*ibid.*, p. 28). Florida was admitted to the Union on March 3, 1845, under a Constitution that had been adopted in 1838. In 1845 there were 25 counties in existence (*ibid.*, pp. 12, 29-30). There are now 67 counties in the state. Flagler County was created on April 28, 1917, from Volusia and St. Johns counties, and was the fifty-third county created in the state (*ibid.*, p. 30).