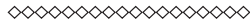


ONE

Early Tourists and Healing Waters



“We have done it! Whether in the body or not, we have been to dream-land, to the land of the fays and the elves, the land where reality ceases and romance begins.”

Harriet Beecher Stowe, 1873, *writing about a steamboat trip to Silver Springs*

Surely, Native Americans were the first Florida tourists. Humans being humans, they sought the beautiful and unusual as well as adventure and good food. “Hey, I hear there’s a huge spring full of catfish at Standing Eagle’s camp. Let’s go pay him a visit...” “They make the best corn soup at Mud Turtle’s village. Why don’t we swing by on the way to your mother’s.” “Brave Seeker’s camp on the big river has a dugout that fits fifteen people! He takes it on long voyages to far off lands and gets the most unusual trade items...”

Of course, these are hypothetical situations, but when a people have occupied a land for more than 14,000 years, they know it well and enjoy visiting special places and people. The natural world was the number one theme park then—no exotic zoos, gardens, or

kitschy shows—and in pre-Columbian Florida, that was enough. Florida was named *La Florida* by early Spanish visitors for a reason—the land of flowers. It was a subtropical Eden. Dangerous if you were careless, but breathtakingly beautiful and unique.

The Seminoles knew it. That’s why they hung on so tenaciously in the deep swamps rather than be shipped to lands in the West. Florida was home. Unsurpassed.

One could argue that early Europeans who landed on Florida’s shores were tourists. Some certainly were, seeking new sights and sounds—adventure! Others primarily sought riches, land, and domination, and so a centuries-long conflict ensued. It can be difficult to revel in the beauty of a spring or a beach when people are shooting arrows at you. Just ask Alvar

Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, that hapless Spaniard who had joined Pánfilo de Narváez in an ill-fated tour of north Florida in 1528. His epic tale of grim survival at the hands of native people and the elements did little to promote the Sunshine State.

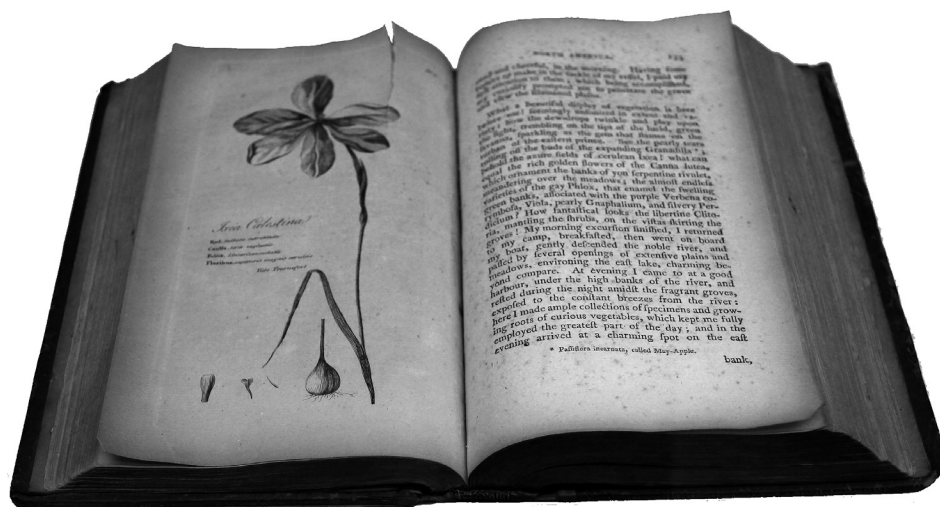
“We felt certain we would all be stricken,” he wrote of being trapped along Apalachee Bay while they waited for ships that never came, “with death the one foreseeable way out; and in such a place, death seemed all the more terrible.” With few tools, materials, or carpentry skills, the crew built five crude sailing vessels for the 242 survivors to sail west. After 6,000 miles in eight years, only four men straggled into Mexico City.

When de Vaca’s story became known and his journal was published, it’s a wonder anyone else wanted to ex-

plore Florida, but they did.

After more tales of woe, such as Jonathan Dickinson’s gripping account of being captured by Indians and walking half-starved to St. Augustine, the stories of Florida began to change. The writings of William Bartram in the late 1700s, for example, stirred the imaginations of a young country and the world. Bartram was a naturalist who marveled at the biodiversity, wild beauty, and native peoples of Florida in the late 1700s. Here’s Bartram’s account of crossing Payne’s Prairie near present-day Gainesville: “Next day we passed over part of the great and beautiful Alachua Savanna, whose exuberant green meadows, with the fertile hills which immediately encircle it, would, if peopled and cultivated after the manner of the civilized countries of Europe, without crowding or in-

The first edition of William Bartram’s Travels Through North Carolina, Georgia, East & West Florida, photographed in the Maclay House in Tallahassee



commoding families, at the moderate estimation, accommodate in the happiest manner above one hundred thousand human inhabitants, besides millions of domestic animals; and I make no doubt this place will at some future day be one of the most populous and delightful seats on earth." No other eighteenth century advertisement to visit and settle Florida could have done a better job, and it proved to be prophetic. The current population of Gainesville, a popular university city, hovers around 125,000.

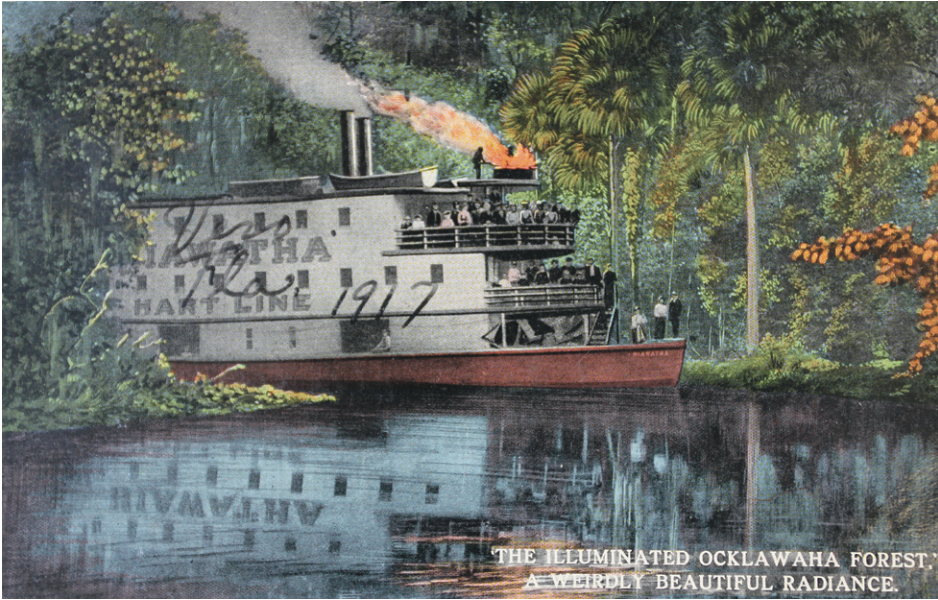
John James Audubon, in the 1830s, attributed an early land boom to Bartram's flowery prose, and Bartram inspired several romanticist poets and writers of the era. But Audubon believed that reality did not always match Bartram's prose. "When the United States purchased the peninsula from the Spanish Government," he wrote, "the representations given of it by Mr. Bartram and other poetical writers were soon found greatly to exceed the reality. For this reason, many of the individuals who flocked to it, returned home or made their way towards other regions with a heavy heart; yet the climate during the winter months is the most delightful that could be imagined."

In one letter, Audubon referred to Bartram after visiting an island in the St. Johns River covered with sour orange trees: "Mr. Bartram was the first to call this a garden, but he is to be forgiven; he was an enthusiastic botanist, and rare plants, in the eyes of such a man, convert a wilderness at once into a garden." Ironically, Audubon's party named the place "Audubon Island."

As the Second Seminole War began to wind down, part of Major Henry Whiting's diary was published in a journal in 1839. His words about Florida's north-flowing St. Johns River, what some would later call "the American Nile," proved to be prophetic: "Invalids have long looked to Florida as a refuge from the Northern winter, and during the disturbances of the last few years, St. Augustine has necessarily been the only place of resort. But when peace shall be established and the St. Johns reoccupied, that river will present many places of great attraction to the infirm and pulmonic."

After the Seminole Wars and Civil War were put to rest, Florida's tourist trade began to kick in, especially during the winter months. Southerners came up with a humorous phrase that rang true: "A Yankee tourist is worth a bale of cotton, and twice as easy to pick."

From Jacksonville's luxury hotels, steamboats began bringing tourists up a maze of rivers, most notably the St. Johns and Ocklawaha. "The shores of the St. John's are wanting in what forms the great beauty of the Hudson—the hills and mountains, to enhance the grandeur of the landscape," states the 1875 *Guide to Florida* by "Rambler." "Here the banks seldom rise more than twenty feet above its placid waters. The scene is, however, most picturesque; and, as the steamer glides over the mirror-like surface, the passengers are loud in their expressions of admiration. From time to time groves of orange trees, covered with golden fruit, are passed—the con-



Postcard photo of Ocklawaha River steamboat, postmarked 1917

trast between them and the forests of oak, pine and cypress, which fringe the shores, making an agreeable variety.”

Freshwater springs were front and center for many steamboat excursions, especially the azure depths of Silver Springs. A Harpers Magazine article in the 1880s boosted interest, and a hotel was built on the shore of the main spring. A railroad and stage-coach line soon connected to it as well. Someone figured out a way to put glass in the bottom of a boat and a profitable enterprise was born. Noted dignitaries to visit Silver Springs included poet Sidney Lanier, writer Harriet Beecher Stowe, inventor Thomas Edison, and Northern Civil War leaders Ulysses S. Grant and William Tecumseh Sherman.

Journalist George M. Barbour accompanied Ulysses Grant on an all-night steamboat trip up the Ocklawaha

to the spring in 1880. “These covered passages are solemn and impressive at any time; but in the night, when lighted up by the blaze of the brilliant bonfire burning on the roof of the wheel-house, then the scene is quite indescribable,” he wrote in *Florida for Tourists, Invalids and Settlers*. “The inky water, the lights and shadows of the foliage, the disturbed birds as they wheel gracefully out of sight, all leave an impression never to be forgotten.”

Barbour also had kind words to say about the people of Tallahassee, Florida’s capital, as evidenced by the testimonial in the front of his book by then Governor W.D. Bloxham, former governor George F. Drew, and two other high-ranking officials. “Nowhere, it may be said in conclusion, is there a more refined and cultured society than in Tallahassee. Among

them are many descendants of the most prominent and aristocratic old families of America.”

But of Wakulla County, just to the south, Barbour wrote:

In Wakulla County is a vast jungle of trees, vines, water, and marsh, that has never yet been fully explored. . . .

Several adventurous gentlemen in Tallahassee have, on various occasions, attempted to penetrate its depths, but found it impossible except at much expense. As far as they penetrated, they found a strange country of volcanic appearance. Every where were seen great masses of rocks, often an acre in extent, all cracked and ragged as if upheaved from a great depth. . . . It is in this impenetrable jungle that the famous ‘Florida volcano’ is supposed to exist, for a column of light, hazy smoke or vapor may be (and has been for years) seen rising from some portion of it, and provokes the conundrum, “What is it?”

The smoke plume from the “Wakulla Volcano” that baffled both residents and visitors alike for decades suddenly disappeared forever after the Charleston earthquake of 1886. It was one more mysterious phenomenon to add to the Florida mystique. Whether it was a peat fire, a natural gas vent, or some other source remains the subject of conjecture to this day.

Despite Wakulla County’s near im-

penetrability at the time, various rail and steamboat routes allowed tourists to find numerous ways to explore Florida, including the more remote parts of northwest Florida. “Pleasant excursion parties are sometimes made up in the spring at Columbus [Georgia],” wrote Sidney Lanier in 1875, “for the purpose of descending the Chattahoochee and Apalachicola in a chartered steamer, fishing, hunting, and exploring the strange Dead Lakes of Calhoun County, as well as the brighter waters of St. Josephs, St. Andrews, and other beautiful bays of this coast.”

Tales of Florida’s abundant and unusual wildlife, such as the alligator, drew sportsmen from throughout the country, and there were no conservation laws to limit wanton killing. Rambler’s 1875 Florida guide was highly subsidized by steamboat lines and motels, and Florida was made to sound like a boundless Eden for the sportsman: “It is during the cold season, when the northern sportsmen are confined indoors, that the game is most plentiful in Florida. Deer, bear, wild cat, raccoon, ‘possum, wild turkey, ducks, geese, snipe, woodcock, quails, partridge, and curlews, are plentiful, and offer fine hunting; while the rivers, bays, and lakes, invite the stranger to the pleasures of the rod, filled as they are with schools of the finest fish.”

Surprisingly, Rambler’s guide—near the back—offered an alarming note in regards to Florida’s roseate spoonbills, often referred to as “pink curlews” during the time period. “This rare bird, however, is nearly exterminated. Their skins bring from ten to

twenty dollars. Their roosts are ruthlessly destroyed, and they are shot without regard to time or condition. They lay but two eggs, and no opportunity for increase is afforded. Numbers are killed and thrown aside because of imperfections. During Sir Francis Sykes' visit to Indian River he sent to England one hundred and sixty-eight perfect roseate spoonbills, but it is calculated that he shot over five hundred to secure the number." Many other wading bird populations would soon be similarly decimated for their plumes, and colorful species such as ivory-billed woodpeckers and Carolina parakeets would be rendered extinct, a downfall partly attributed to the desires of early Florida tourists and visiting collectors.

James A. Henshall, in *Camping and Cruising in Florida*, published in 1884, bragged about Florida's Gulf coast south of Cedar Key. "The Gulf coast of Florida is, perhaps, the finest cruising ground for small yachts in the world. The water is shallow, and seldom rough, for it takes a gale of wind to kick up much of a sea, and harbors lie plentifully all along the coast. Small boats can find an inside passage from Cedar Key to Cape Sable, almost the entire distance. . . . My pen is inadequate to describe the pleasures to be enjoyed, and the beauties and wonders of nature to be observed, during a winter spent on the southern coasts of Florida."

Foreign visitors, too, extolled the virtues of Florida, and this brought more Europeans to explore the Sunshine State. In 1895, the Frenchman

Paul Bourget wrote *Outre-Mer: Impressions of America*. In Lake Worth, near the end of his journey, he wrote, "What a country to be happy in, after the manner of a plant that grows in the sun, unmindful and without desire to be elsewhere! . . . A warm odor and a sense of growth which inebriates, exhales from these trees and from these grasses, from these fields of pineapples, and forests of cocoanut trees."

Riding the crest of a wave in Florida tourism in the 1800s was the promise that Florida's climate and mineral springs could cure various types of ailments. People came from all over, seeking healing and respite, and creating a "medical tourism" industry in the process. Soak in the waters, drink the waters—tolerating a strong sulfur taste and odor—and you'll feel better than when you first arrived. That was the hope, anyhow. Bottles and jugs of the healing liquid were brought back home by the caseload to help see one through until the next visit.

Health spas opened primarily at sulfur springs where the "rotten egg" smelling waters were said to cure rheumatism, indigestion, dyspepsia, gastritis, syphilis, jaundice, skin diseases, and stomach, kidney and bladder problems. More than one promoter claimed a particular spring was the original "Fountain of Youth" sought after by Spanish explorer Ponce de León. The spas and adjoining hotels included the Panacea Mineral Springs along the Big Bend Gulf coast, Newport Springs on the St. Marks River, Hampton Springs on the Fenholloway River, Suwannee Springs and White

Sulphur Springs along the Suwannee River, Worthington Springs on the Santa Fe River, Green Cove Springs on the St. Johns, Orange Springs on the Ocklawaha, and Espiritu Santo Springs in Safety Harbor. Only Espiritu Santo Springs still operates as a spa today, although a late arrival to the spring/spa world, Warm Mineral Springs near Sarasota, operates as well.

Most mineral spring attractions had large hotels for overnight guests and bath houses, benches, and concrete weir dams circling the springs, commonly known as springhouses. Testimonials of healing results from visitors were commonplace as the resorts vied for customers.

“Suwannee Springs, not far from Live Oak, is one of the most famous

springs of Florida,” wrote Nevin O. Winter in 1918. “It is noted for its healing qualities, while the river itself is most charming with its wooded banks.”

Local historians believe Native Americans regarded White Sulphur Springs along the Suwannee River as sacred and a neutral zone, much like the catlinite quarries for Native American medicine pipes in southern Minnesota. It is believed that a member of any tribe could bathe in the healing waters along the Suwannee without fear of being attacked, and wounded warriors would take advantage of this refuge. According to the 1939 *WPA Guide to Florida*, Native Americans marked trees in a five-mile circle around the springs, and the area was also known as “Rebel’s Refuge”

Suwannee Springs today, showing ruins of the old springhouse





Above: Early nineteenth-century postcard showing the springhouse at White Springs (now called White Sulphur Springs) along the Suwannee River



Left: Reconstructed White Springs springhouse, photographed in 2015

during the Civil War since many plantation owners lived there in relative peace throughout the conflict.

White Sulphur Springs was the first Florida mineral spring to be commercialized, prompting today's promoters to call it "Florida's first tourist attraction." It was initially featured as Jackson Springs in 1831. A log cabin springhouse was built, followed by a concrete and coquina structure in 1903. The spring attraction gave rise to the town, and by the 1880s visitors could choose from 500 hotel and boardinghouse rooms.

Green Cove Springs on the St. Johns River was known as "the Parlor City," and besides being a famous port city, it was famous for its sulfur springs. "The location of the town is

very attractive, circling about a wooded and picturesque hollow, from which gushes a bold, magnificent sulphur spring, with a basin as large as the foundation of a cottage, and as deep in places as the cottage's peaked roof," wrote J.W. White in his 1890 guidebook. "The water is strong sulphur and is esteemed a very fine remedial agent in cases of neuralgia, nervous prostration, rheumatism, liver and kidney complaints. The water empties from the spring into several bathing pools of unusual size and beauty, which are open and in use all year round."

The town of Panacea was founded around several small sulfuric springs in the late 1800s. Formerly called Smith Springs, the town was renamed "Panacea"—Greek for "healing all"—

The historic Adams Country Store in downtown White Springs, established in 1885, was in business during the peak of the White Springs resort



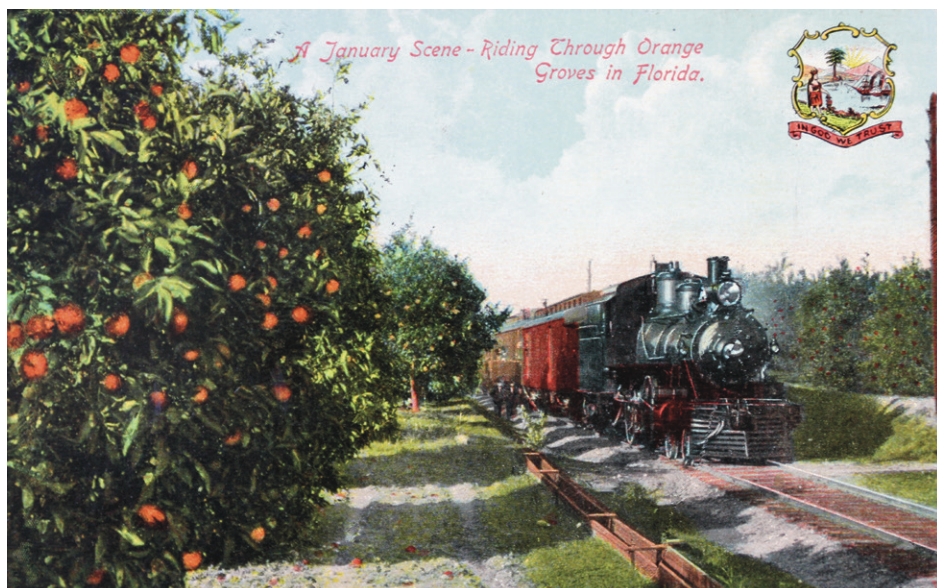
to sound more appealing to visitors, a trick that seemed to work. The 125-guest Panacea Hotel was built to house the numerous guests who came to bathe in the waters.

Hampton Springs near Perry featured the massive wooden Hotel Hampton and guaranteed its spring water as effective treatment for skin diseases, rheumatism, indigestion, dyspepsia, gastritis, and various other stomach, kidney, and bladder troubles. It was purchased by Joe Hampton before the Civil War for \$10. He had been directed there by a Native American medicine man, who said the spring would help with Hampton's rheumatism and other ills. The advice proved to be helpful. A 1930 guidebook, *Florida, Empire of the Sun*, published by the Florida State Hotel

Commission, called the attraction "a delightful resort with a club house, and a splendid mineral spring. Golfing, tennis, horseback riding and other sports are available. Hunting and fishing in the virgin wilderness, through which flows the rock-ribbed Fenholloway River, attracts many a sportsman." Theodore Roosevelt, one of the country's most famous sportsmen, was said to be a guest.

By the mid-1930s, as roads and railroads extended deeper into the Florida peninsula, tourists began to head farther south. Coupled with the Great Depression, most mineral spring resorts became relics of the past and many of the old hotels burned down. Some springs, such as White Sulphur Springs on the Suwannee, diminished in flow due to aquifer pumping in the

Vintage postcard with a 1911 postmark. Most early Florida tourists traveled by train and steamboat.



region for farming, phosphate mining, and the growing city of Jacksonville to the east.

On a recent visit to Newport Springs, I waded into the cool clear water that bore a sharp odor of hydrogen sulfide. “I guess this is what you would call a sulfur spring,” I said to a man with his grandkids.

“This ain’t no sulfur spring,” he said. “This is stinky water!”

Still, it felt good, although there was no miraculous cure for my sore shoulder. I guess I needed to stay a few days and bring some of the “stinky water” home, and maybe drink it by the gallon. I vowed to search for another cure.

Florida’s numerous freshwater lakes were also popular with visitors for bathing. A 1913 postcard showed bathers and canoeists on a lake near

St. Cloud. The note on the back, written in January to a Pennsylvania friend, was typical of those from many visitors: “Hitch up your auto and come down here and take a bath. Fine weather.” It was signed Amos Kiehl. An Internet search revealed that Kiehl was a well-known Pennsylvania Civil War veteran. He served from 1862 to war’s end and fought in several major battles. One can only wonder what joy and solace winters in Florida may have provided during his senior years, and over the decades to come Kiehl’s invitation to northern friends and relatives would be duplicated a million fold by subsequent “snowbird” visitors.

Early postcard showing bathers in a freshwater lake at St. Cloud in 1912

