

A Short History of **Florida**



MUSEUM OF FLORIDA HISTORY

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Featured on front cover (left to right)

- Juan Ponce de León, Spanish explorer, 1513
- Osceola, Seminole war leader, 1838
- David Levy Yulee, first U.S. senator from Florida, 1845
- Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune, founder of Bethune-Cookman College in Daytona Beach, 1923



Florida Indian people preparing a feast, ca. 1565

EARLY HUMAN INHABITANTS

People first reached Florida at least 12,000 years ago. The rich variety of environments in prehistoric Florida supported a large number of plants and animals. The animal population included most mammals that we know today. In addition, many other large mammals that are now extinct (such as the saber-tooth

tiger, mastodon, giant armadillo, and camel) roamed the land.

The Florida coastline along the Atlantic Ocean and the Gulf of Mexico was very different 12,000 years ago. The sea level was much lower than it is today. As a result, the Florida peninsula was more than twice as large as it is now.

The people who inhabited early Florida were hunters and gatherers and only occasionally sought big game. Their diets consisted mainly of small animals, plants, nuts, and shellfish. The first Floridians settled in areas where a steady water supply, good stone resources for tool-making, and firewood were available. Over the centuries, these native people developed complex cultures.

During the period prior to contact with Europeans, native societies in the peninsula developed cultivated agriculture, trade with other groups in what is now the southeastern United States, and increased social organization, reflected in large temple mounds and village complexes.

EUROPEAN EXPLORATION AND COLONIZATION

Written records about life in Florida began with the arrival of the Spanish explorer and adventurer Juan Ponce de León in 1513. Sometime between April 2 and April 8, Ponce de León waded ashore on the east coast of Florida, possibly near present-day Melbourne Beach. He called the area *La Florida*, in honor of Pascua Florida (“feast of the flowers”), Spain’s Eastertime celebration. Other Europeans may have reached Florida earlier, but no firm evidence of such achievement has been found.

On another voyage in 1521, Ponce de León landed on the southwestern coast of the peninsula, accompanied by two hundred people, fifty horses, and numerous beasts of



Ponce de León

burden. His colonization attempt quickly failed because of attacks by native people. Ponce de León's activities served, however, to identify Florida as a desirable place for explorers, missionaries, and treasure seekers.

Hernando de Soto began another expedition in 1539 in search of gold and silver, which took him on a long trek through Florida and what is now the southeastern United States. For four years, de Soto's expedition wandered, in hopes of finding the fabled wealth of the Indian people. De Soto and his soldiers camped for five months in the area now known as Tallahassee. De Soto died near the Mississippi River in 1542. The survivors of his expedition eventually reached Mexico. No great treasure troves awaited the Spanish conquistadores who explored Florida. However, their stories helped inform Europeans about Florida and its relationship to Cuba, Mexico, and Central and South America, from which Spain regularly shipped gold, silver, and other products. Groups of heavily laden Spanish vessels, called plate fleets, usually sailed up the Gulf Stream through the straits that parallel Florida's Keys. Aware of this route, pirates preyed on the fleets. Hurricanes created additional problems, sometimes wrecking the ships on the reefs and shoals stretching along Florida's eastern coast.

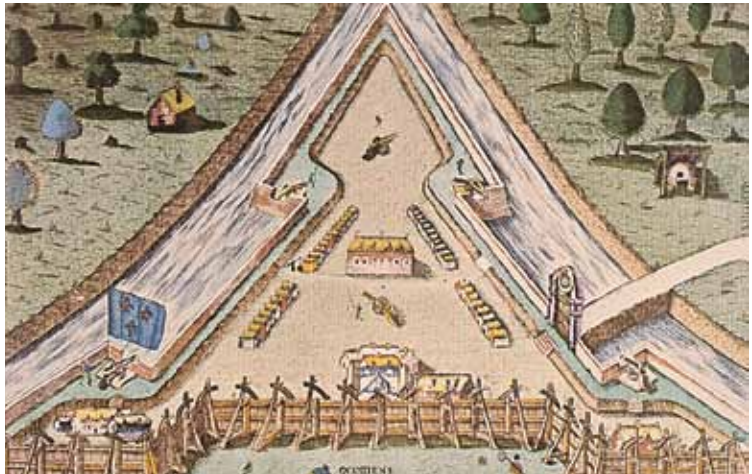
In 1559, Tristán de Luna led another attempt by Europeans to colonize Florida. He

established a settlement on Pensacola Bay, but a series of misfortunes caused his efforts to be abandoned after two years.

Spain was not the only European nation that found Florida attractive. In 1562, the French Protestant Jean Ribault explored the area. Two years later, fellow Frenchman René Goulaine de Laudonnière established Fort Caroline at the mouth of the St. Johns River (near present-day Jacksonville).

FIRST SPANISH PERIOD

These French adventurers prompted Spain to accelerate plans for colonization. Pedro Menéndez de Avilés hastened across the Atlantic, his sights set on removing the French and creating a Spanish settlement. Menéndez arrived in 1565 at a place he called San Agustín (St. Augustine) and established the first permanent European settlement in what is now the United States. He achieved his goal of expelling the French, attacking and killing all French settlers except for professing Roman Catholics and non-combatants. Menéndez captured Fort Caroline and renamed it San Mateo.



Fort Caroline, 1564–65



Spanish mission, 17th century (artist's rendition)

French response came two years later, when Dominique de Gourgues recaptured San Mateo and made the Spanish soldiers stationed there pay with their lives. However, this incident did not halt the Spanish advance. Their pattern of constructing forts and Roman Catholic missions continued. Spanish missions, established among the Indian people, soon extended across north Florida and northward along the coast as far as the area we now know as South Carolina.

The English, also eager to exploit the wealth of the Americas, increasingly came into conflict with Spain's expanding empire. In 1586, the English captain Sir Francis Drake sacked and burned the tiny village of St. Augustine. Spanish control of Florida, however, was undiminished.

In fact, as late as 1600, Spain's power over what is now the southeastern United States was unquestioned. When English settlers came to America, they established their first colonies well to the north, at Jamestown (1607) and Plymouth (1620). English colonists wanted to exploit the continent's natural resources and gradually pushed the borders of Spanish power southward into present-day southern Georgia. At the same

time, French influence spread from Louisiana eastward along the Gulf Coast.

The English colonists in the Carolina colonies were particularly antagonistic toward Spain. Led by Colonel James Moore, the Carolinians and their Creek Indian allies laid siege to Spanish Florida in 1702 and destroyed the town of St. Augustine. However, they could not capture the fort, named Castillo de San Marcos. Two years later, they destroyed the missions between Tallahassee and St.

Augustine, killing many native people and enslaving others. The French continued to harass Spanish Florida's western perimeter and captured Pensacola in 1719, twenty-one years after the town had been established.

When Georgia, England's southernmost continental colony, was founded in 1733, Spain's adversaries moved even closer. Georgians attacked Florida in 1740 and besieged the Castillo de San Marcos at St. Augustine for almost a month. While this attack was not successful, it did point out the growing weakness of Spanish Florida.

BRITISH FLORIDA

Britain gained control of Florida in 1763 in exchange for Havana, Cuba, which the British had captured from Spain during the Seven Years' War (1756–63). Spain evacuated Florida after the exchange, leaving the province virtually empty. At that time, St. Augustine was still a garrison community with fewer than five hundred houses, and Pensacola was also a small military town.

The British had ambitious plans for Florida. First, the land was split into two parts: West



Battle of Pensacola, 1781

Florida, with its seat at Pensacola, and East Florida, with its capital at St. Augustine. British surveyors mapped much of the landscape and coastline and tried to develop relations with a group of Indian people who were moving into the area from the north. The British called these Creek people “Seminolies” or Seminoles. Britain attempted to attract white settlers by offering land on which to settle and help for those who produced goods for export. Given sufficient time, the strategy might have converted Florida into a flourishing colony, but British rule lasted only twenty years.

The two Floridas remained loyal to Great Britain throughout the War for American Independence (1775–83). However, Spain—participating indirectly in the war as an ally of France—captured Pensacola from the British in 1781, and in 1784 regained the rest of Florida as part of the peace treaty that ended the American Revolution.

SECOND SPANISH PERIOD

When the British evacuated Florida, Spanish colonists and settlers from the United States began to pour in. Many of the new residents

were lured by desirable Spanish terms for land grants. Others who came were escaped slaves, going where their U.S. masters could not effectively reach them. Instead of becoming more Spanish, the Floridas increasingly became more “American.” Finally, after several official and unofficial U.S. military incursions into the territory, Spain formally ceded the Floridas to the United States in 1821 under the Adams-Onís Treaty.

On one of those military operations, in 1818, General Andrew Jackson made a foray into Florida. Jackson’s battles with Florida’s Indian people later would be called the First Seminole War.

TERRITORIAL PERIOD

Jackson returned to Florida in 1821 to establish a new territorial government on behalf of the United States. The U.S. inherited a wilderness dotted with small settlements of Indian people, African Americans, and Spaniards.

As a territory of the United States, Florida was particularly enticing to people from the older plantation areas of Virginia, the Carolinas, and Georgia, who arrived in considerable numbers. After territorial status was granted, the two Floridas were merged into one entity with a new capital city in Tallahassee. Established in 1824, Tallahassee was chosen because it was halfway between the existing governmental seats of St. Augustine and Pensacola.



Territorial Seal



Tallahassee street scene, late 1830s

As Florida's immigrant population increased, so did pressure on the federal government to remove the Indian people from their lands. The Indian population was made up of several groups, including the Seminole and Miccosukee people. Many African American refugees lived with the Indians. Indian removal was popular with white settlers because the native people occupied lands that whites coveted and because their communities often provided sanctuary for runaway slaves from the north.

Among Florida's native population, the name of Osceola has remained familiar after more than a century-and-a-half. Osceola was a Seminole war leader who refused to leave his homeland in Florida. Seminoles, already noted for their fighting abilities, won the respect of U.S. soldiers for their bravery, fortitude, and ability to adapt to changing circumstances during the Second Seminole War (1835–42). That war, the most significant of the three conflicts between Indian people and U.S. troops in Florida, began over whether the Seminoles should be moved westward across the Mississippi River into what is now Oklahoma. The U.S. government, under President Andrew Jackson, spent \$20 million

and the lives of many U.S. soldiers, Indian people, and U.S. citizens to force removal of the Seminoles. In the end, the issue remained in doubt. Some Indians migrated "voluntarily"; some were captured and sent west under military guard; and others escaped into

the Everglades, where they made a life for themselves away from contact with whites.

Today, reservations are occupied by Florida's Indian people at Immokalee, Hollywood, Brighton (near the city of Okeechobee), and



Osceola

along the Big Cypress Swamp. In addition to the Seminole people, Florida also has a separate Miccosukee tribe.

By 1840, white Floridians concentrated increasingly on developing the territory and gaining statehood. The territory's population reached 54,477, with African American slaves making up almost one-half of that number. Steamboat navigation was well established on the Apalachicola and St. Johns Rivers, and railroads were planned. Florida now was divided informally into three areas: East Florida, from the Atlantic Ocean to the Suwannee River; Middle Florida, between the Suwannee and the Apalachicola Rivers; and West Florida, from the Apalachicola to the Perdido River. The southern area of the territory (below present-day Gainesville) was sparsely settled by whites. The territory's economy was based on agriculture. Plantations were concentrated in Middle Florida, and their owners set much of the political tone for all of Florida until after the Civil War.

STATEHOOD

Florida became the twenty-seventh state in the United States on March 3, 1845. William D. Moseley was elected the new state's first governor, and David Levy Yulee, one of Florida's leading proponents of statehood, became a U.S. senator. By 1850, the population had grown to 87,445, which included about 39,000 African American slaves and 1,000 free blacks.

The slavery issue came to dominate the affairs of the new state. Most Florida voters (who were white males aged twenty-one and older) did not object to slavery and were concerned about the growing feeling in the North against it. During the 1850s, many white Floridians viewed the new anti-slavery Republican party with suspicion.

In the 1860 presidential election, no Floridians voted for Abraham Lincoln, although the Illinois Republican won at the national level. Shortly after Lincoln's election, a special convention drew up an ordinance of secession, and Florida seceded from the Union on January 10, 1861. Within several weeks, Florida joined with other southern states to form the Confederate States of America.



Painting of Florida's first state seal, used ca. 1846–68

CIVIL WAR AND RECONSTRUCTION

During the Civil War, Florida was not ravaged as several other southern states were. Indeed, no decisive battles were fought on Florida soil. Union forces occupied many coastal towns and forts, while the interior of the state remained in Confederate hands.

Florida provided an estimated 15,000 troops and significant amounts of supplies to the Confederacy, but more than 2,000 Floridians, both African American and white, joined the Union army. Confederate and foreign merchant ships slipped through the Union navy blockade along the Florida coast, bringing in needed supplies from overseas ports. Florida supplied the Confederacy with salt, beef, pork, cotton, and other products. Tallahassee was the only Southern capital east of the Mississippi River to avoid capture during the war, spared by Southern victories at Olustee (1864) and Natural Bridge (1865). Ultimately, the South



Confederate troops near Pensacola, 1861

was defeated, and federal troops occupied Tallahassee on May 10, 1865.

Before the Civil War, Florida had been well on its way to becoming another of the southern cotton states. Afterward, the lives of many Florida residents changed. The ports of Jacksonville and Pensacola shipped lumber for post-war rebuilding. Those who had been slaves were declared free. Plantation owners tried to regain prewar levels of production by hiring former slaves to raise and pick cotton. However, such arrangements did not work well, and much of the land came under cultivation by tenant farmers and sharecroppers, both African American and white.

Beginning in 1868, the federal government instituted a congressional program of “reconstruction” in Florida and the other southern states. During this period, Republican officeholders tried to enact sweeping changes, many of which were

aimed at improving conditions for African Americans.

At the time of the 1876 presidential election, federal troops still occupied Florida. The state’s Republican government and recently enfranchised African American voters helped put Rutherford B. Hayes in the White House. Democrats, however, gained control of enough state offices to end the years of Republican rule and prompt the removal of federal troops. A series of political battles in the state left African Americans with little voice in their government.

FLORIDA DEVELOPMENT

During the final quarter of the nineteenth century, large-scale commercial agriculture in Florida, especially cattle raising, grew in importance. Industries such as cigar manufacturing took root in the immigrant communities of the state.

Potential investors became interested in industries that extracted resources from the water and land. The extractive industries were as widely diverse as sponge harvesting in Tarpon Springs and phosphate mining in the southwestern part of the state.

The Florida citrus industry grew rapidly, despite occasional freezes and economic setbacks. The development of industries throughout the state prompted the construction of roads and railroads on a large scale.

Beginning in the 1870s, tourists from northern states visited Florida to enjoy the state’s natural beauty and mild climate.



Train crossing a lake near Gainesville, ca. 1890s

Steamboat tours on Florida's winding rivers were a popular attraction for these visitors.

The growth of Florida's transportation industry had its origins in 1855, when the state legislature passed the Internal Improvement Act. Like legislation passed by several other states and the federal government, Florida's act offered cheap or free public land to investors, particularly those interested in transportation. The act, and other legislation like it, had its greatest effect in the years between the end of the Civil War and the beginning of World War I. During this period, many railroads were constructed throughout the state by companies owned by Henry Flagler and Henry B. Plant, who also built lavish hotels near their railroad lines. The Internal Improvement Act stimulated the initial efforts to drain the

southern portion of the state to convert it to farmland.

These development projects had far-reaching effects on the agricultural, manufacturing, and extractive industries of late-nineteenth-century Florida. The citrus industry especially benefited, since it was now possible to pick oranges in south Florida; put them on

a train heading north; and sell them in Baltimore, Philadelphia, or New York in less than a week.

In 1898, national attention focused on Florida, as the Spanish-American War began. The port city of Tampa served as the primary staging area for U.S. troops bound for the war in Cuba. Many Floridians supported the Cuban peoples' desire to be free of Spanish colonial rule.

By the turn of the century, Florida's population and per capita wealth were



The beach at Seabreeze (Daytona Beach), 1904

increasing rapidly; the potential of the “Sunshine State” appeared endless. By the end of World War I, land developers had descended on this virtual gold mine. With more Americans owning automobiles, it became commonplace to vacation in Florida. Many visitors stayed on, and exotic projects sprang up in southern Florida. Some people moved onto land made from drained swamps. Others bought canal-crossed tracts through what had been dry land. The real estate developments quickly attracted buyers, and land in Florida was sold and resold. Profits and prices for many developers reached inflated levels.

THE GREAT DEPRESSION IN FLORIDA

Florida’s economic bubble burst in 1926, when money and credit ran out, and banks and investors abruptly ceased trusting the “paper” millionaires. Severe hurricanes swept through the state in 1926 and 1928, further damaging Florida’s economy. By the time the Great Depression began in the rest of the nation in 1929, Floridians already had become accustomed to economic hardship.

In 1929, the Mediterranean fruit fly invaded the state, and the citrus industry suffered. A quarantine was established, and troops set up roadblocks and checkpoints to search vehicles for any contraband citrus fruit. Florida’s citrus production was cut by about sixty percent.

Florida’s government began to represent a larger proportion of its citizens. Florida’s female citizens won the right to vote in 1920, when the Nineteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution became

law. In 1937, the requirement that voters pay a poll tax was repealed, allowing poor African American and white Floridians to have a greater voice in their government. In 1944, the U.S. Supreme Court outlawed a system of all-white primary elections that had limited the right of African Americans to vote.

WORLD WAR II AND THE POST-WAR “BOOM”

World War II spurred economic development in Florida. Because of its year-round mild climate, the state became a major training center for soldiers, sailors, and aviators of the United States and its allies. Highway and airport construction accelerated so that, by war’s end, Florida had an up-to-date transportation network ready for use by residents and the visitors who seemed to arrive in an endless stream.

A significant trend of the postwar era has been steady population growth, resulting from large migrations to the state from within the U.S. and from countries throughout the



World War II training camp, Miami Beach

western hemisphere, notably Cuba and Haiti. Florida is now the fourth most populous state in the nation.

The people who make up Florida's diverse population have worked to make the Sunshine State a place where all citizens have equal rights under the law. Since the 1950s, Florida's public education system and public places have undergone great changes. African American citizens, joined by Governor LeRoy Collins and other white supporters, fought to end racial discrimination in schools and other institutions.

Since World War II, Florida's economy

also has become more diverse. Tourism, cattle, citrus, and phosphate have been joined by a host of new industries that have greatly expanded the numbers of jobs available to Floridians. Electronics, construction, real estate, international banking, and biomedical research are among the state's more recently developed industries.

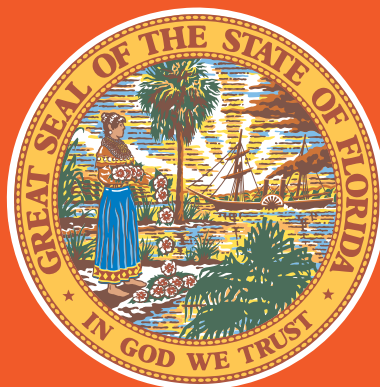
Several major U.S. corporations have moved their headquarters to Florida. An interstate highway system exists throughout the state, and Florida is home to major international airports. The university and community college system has expanded rapidly, and high-technology industries have grown steadily. The U.S. space program—with its historic launches from Cape Canaveral, lunar landings, and the space shuttle program—has brought much media attention to Florida. The citrus industry continues to prosper, despite occasional winter freezes. Florida's tourism industry also remains important, bolstered by large capital investments. Florida attractions, such as the large theme parks in the Orlando area, bring millions of visitors to the state from across the U.S. and around the world.

Today, Floridians study their state's long history to learn more about the lives of the men and women who shaped its exciting past. By learning about our rich and varied heritage, we can draw lessons to help create a better Florida for all of its citizens.

*Historical images courtesy of the
State Archives of Florida;
other images from the
Museum of Florida History.*



The space shuttle *Discovery* flying
over Florida's Capitol, 1992



Florida Department of State
Division of Cultural Affairs