

## The Heart of Lightness: Settlers in the Swampshine State

A Shark's Tooth from Shell Island

(about the size of a quarter)



While Florida was coming and going under the sea, humans were making their way from Africa to Asia to Europe to the Americas, and finally to Wekiva. First they entered Florida by foot, by kayak, and by dugout; later nations came from Europe by galleon, by horseback, by cart or carriage, by sail and steamboat. Whatever their mode of travel, Wekiva was just about the last place they would find.

Florida is not one of the original states, but it is the oldest European colony in the union. Its strange history of peoples coming and going—Mary Austin would say, *paso por aqui*—begins with natives who migrated up and around from Mexico, other island-hopping cultures from the Caribbean and even South America, and later, refugees coming down from the southeastern states to escape deportation to Oklahoma. We need an appreciation of these cultural cross-currents in Florida to understand the community of the river we are building, as many before us have done.

The first European settlement in Florida occurred in 1562 when Jean Ribaut and his French Huguenots built Fort Caroline on the south bank of the St. Johns River, safely inland from the mouth. The Spanish, under Pedro Menendez de Aviles, arrived shortly thereafter and drove out the French in a series of bloody encounters. The first governor of Florida, Menendez settled his strong force at St. Augustine in 1565, making it by far the oldest city in the United States.

The Spanish built their fort and town with the aid of Africans, both free and slave. For almost two hundred years, then, Florida grew as a Spanish colony with cultural assimilation and some intermarriage between Spanish, African, and the indigenous nations, mainly the Tequesta,

Calusa, Miami, Timucua (var. Tomoka), and Apalachee. That's a long time, by the standards of American history—longer indeed than Florida's U. S. history--and only in the past twenty years have scholars begun to do it justice.

In 1763, after the French and Indian War, when the balance of colonial powers in North America had fully shifted, Spain traded Florida to the British in exchange for Havana. Consequently, in the next decade Florida found itself on the wrong side of the American Revolution, and hence, after the British were defeated, another trade was made and Florida became Spanish again.

In another forty years, Spain ceded Florida to the U. S. (1819) and it became an official territory in 1821 when we paid five million dollars for every acre and watershed of it. The official population in 1825 was only 13, 500. How could so few control so much? Clearly some elements of the Spanish era remained a part of the new territory and blended into the growing population. Meanwhile, the Seminoles and Miccosukes strongly and courageously resisted the policy of removal, surviving as a nation in the recesses of the Everglades.

Made a state in 1845, Florida was again on the wrong side of history in the Civil War, flying a Confederate flag. What other state of the union has played so much political see-saw? From the beginning, sticking out as it does into the sea of political possibilities, Florida has always been a state of change and migration.

When we tell history like this in broad strokes, we lose contact with the actual people and communities which are the heart of our culture. In 1850, after three hundred years of cultural upheaval and political hopscotch, Florida had a growing population of 87,000. The land sustained them while the governments came and went. They included titled landowners, their slaves or tenants, rugged individualists, refugee slaves, squatters, and "injuns." It really wasn't until after a half-century of Seminole wars and then the Civil War that the new state became fully open to U. S. settlement. Then the word got out about our glorious timber stands and our winter wonderland. Almost all of the towns and communities of central Florida, including Wekiva, date their origins and often their names from the period between 1875 and 1900.

In large numbers they came from the northeast and midwest. Most traveled down the east coast by all sorts of vessels and down the St. Johns River by steamship. At the end of the century the railroads followed, but in the wide swampy valley of the St. Johns, the routes available for roads and rails over land are limited. Ships, of course, can carry anything, but rails are much better to get materials and goods across the country or to an ocean port.

Every resource to be extracted has to have these pipelines, has to have a large labor force to run them. Nothing in the history of civilization and a healthy ecology has stood up well in the context. Wekiva knows this story because it was in the 1850's that the Florida spring became the logical vehicle for both extraction and production. The first and second magnitude springs provided energy for a mill and transportation to a port. A major impetus for this growth was the

Swamp Land Act of 1850 by which the U. S. gave the State of Florida twenty two million acres of swampshine. It wasn't quite the gold rush of California, but folks did get a little heady over it.

One of the first settlers to reach the Wekiva was William S. Delk. A native of Georgia and a slave owner, Delk belonged to the Whig party that opposed slavery. He came to Florida to fight in the Second Seminole war and received forty acres of land near Rock Springs for that service. Later he was able to homestead an additional 160 acres which includes the springs and what is now Kelly Park. He farmed cotton and had both a sawmill and a gristmill that used the spring run.

Perhaps he settled in the Florida territory with his wife of African descent and their son in order to avoid the coming war between the states, thinking like Whitman and the free-soil democrats that Florida should not be engulfed in the slavery controversy. However, Florida was a confederate state from 1862-68.

I wonder how the concept of private property worked for him when it came to his family. We know that he freed his slaves when the Civil War commenced and moved up north to fight on the Union side. After it ended, his son returned and was unable to claim his father's land holdings. So the force of the war can be seen as an extension of liberation of the person, but not always his land.

In our time, America has great clarity about how a human may not be owned or be one's property. Today, even parents are not perceived as owners of their children, although the normal relationship is still considered practically sacred. In reality, though, parenthood is divided between mother and father, and thereafter between the both of them and the state. The state's interest in the life of the child sometimes supersedes the "proprietary rights" of the parents. Abuse of the child is reason enough to forfeit those rights and, it might seem a stretch, but the same could be said of the rights of the river or the land. The preservation of Wekiva in the past thirty years, as this book means to document, is assurance enough that the people here now have almost the same mutual love and respect for the land and water as for their parents or children.

Many of those who built Florida in the nineteenth century were not really settlers, but wealthy speculators from afar. Besides oranges, lumber, and turpentine, they saw the next stage of Florida's population flow, that new phenomenon, the snowbird coming down just for the warm winter spell. Ever since the last quarter of the nineteenth-century, for better and for worse, for richer and for poorer, Florida has been governed by the ratio of tourist to settler. By my estimation, since 1870 we have averaged three visitors per year for each resident. This, until recently, unwinged migration is understandably a central issue for the ecosystem and all its communities. To live in Florida is to live with a calendar full of snowbirds, mostly from December to April, topped off by the infamous spring break. This tourism feeds new settlement, so that every day upwards of a thousand new settlers arrive to prime the pump of housing growth and sprawl.

In spite of all this turmoil, the State of Florida has recently developed some singleness of mind about the problem that is wonderful to behold: the principle of growth management. The idea, which started in the 1970's, balances population pressures and economic prosperity with conservation of the most precious habitats and preservation of the ecological systems that underlie all human civilization.

My single word for this enlightenment is *Wekiva* and that, magically enough, rhymes with Godiva. Even though the river is only a modest contributory to the St. Johns (the main stream just sixteen miles long), the beauty and wilderness of its large wetland basin has raised it to the center of attention for the success of a statewide program of conservation and community. The phrase we use, *growth management*, is only a contradiction if the two sides stop working together.

Today hundreds of thousands enjoy the river every year.<sup>1</sup> We are a different breed. When I take our children or my students to the river or walk along its sandy uplands to show them undiscovered and unmapped springs popping out of the ground, they and I are still abiding in a domesticated world that erects a substantial, almost impervious barrier to the wilderness of the river. Nevertheless, that wildness is built unconsciously into our bodies. We are not like the Timucuan, the first humans to come down the St. Johns River and eventually up the Wekiva to the two main springs. They knew they were river people.

For me, gradually, Wekiva has become not just a river, but a state of mind, a habit of place. It doesn't just belong to the aboriginal river-dwellers who lived largely on snails and mussels, turtles and fish, shopped from the river bed. Wekiva also inhabits those who inhabit it now and who have grown to love and care for it.

So this book is also the story of a small grass roots organization, The Friends of the Wekiva River, Inc. (FOWR). In the last twenty years of the twentieth century they have helped secure a lasting legacy of the river for generations to come. After more than a century of human degradation of the earth, Wekiva is probably the best story in the east of how we can help preserve and restore a watershed and its ecosystems. It might take another century. Nature has enormous powers of self healing and all we have to do is give it half a chance.

Chartered in 1982 as a non-profit organization with nineteen members, the FOWR have been the primary agents in cleaning up the river, having it designated as an Outstanding Florida Waterway and a national Wild and Scenic River, one of only three in the east. They have helped the state and the counties purchase large tracts of land in the basin, so that now the river engages almost 70,000 acres of protected Florida uplands and wetlands. And finally, even though it took a coalition of many forces, it was largely through their efforts that the legislature passed the

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<sup>1</sup> Attendance at the two major parks alone accounts for half a million. So add to that another hundred thousand for those who hike, hunt, and paddle the rest of the basin.

Wekiva River Protection Act in 1988, an exemplary law that provides buffers for the river from several different kinds of development.

Across America, the river is the focus of an enormous and powerful democratic movement, both to preserve the quality of life and to educate the quickly domesticated techno-mind to a more comprehensive understanding of the ensemble of water-ways and life cycles. The Song of Wekiva is a mockingbird's celebration of that great spirit of American pioneers because the frontier of our bodies, our children, and our minds, like the river and land itself, is still up for grabs.



**Sulphur Run above Sweet Gum Spring**

I will not write about Wekiva as a pure success story of the grassroots democracy—although a case can be made for that—because quite simply my experience has been that the battle for conservation is never won, because democracy can easily be stamped out like a fire in the pasture, and because it really is all the people of Florida, republicans and democrats, natives and immigrants, who have produced this national landmark of environmental protection.

Wekiva is about the conservation or protection of the ecological system (our common child) from any interests of private property owners that might be abusive. Actually, it goes much deeper than that. Wekiva is about the necessary balance between citizens (propertied or not) and the ecosystem (soil-water-plants-animals) which sustains their well-being and health. Slavery is

the denial of one human's place in the freedoms of the nation and in fact the species. Opposing conservation or sustainable growth is a denial of that species' place in creation.

The land or river in this sense is the parent of democracy. The American dream is perfectly fulfilled when persons are equal and the health of the land is secure and intact enough for growth to take place. Wekiva is about the balance it takes to do that every day in a world of change.

*Do you guess I have some intricate purpose?  
Well I have, for the Fourth-month showers have, and the mica on  
the side of a rock has.*

*Do you take it I would astonish?  
Does the daylight astonish? does the early redstart twittering  
through the woods?  
Do I astonish more than they?*

*This hour I tell things in confidence,  
I might not tell everybody, but I will tell you.*

Whitman: "Song of Myself" 44