

Ghost Towns, Vanishing Florida and the Geography of Memory

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Perhaps it is the land itself—the way the jungle encroaches upon the built environment and eventually swallows it in lush greens. Here human existence necessitates constant struggle against nature, whether the vegetation, the bugs, or the man-eating reptiles. The sea air corrodes, the constant humidity rots, and the land inevitably reclaims that which is claimed by would-be conquerors, beginning with the Spanish explorers. Or perhaps it is the quickness with which developers—modern-day *conquistadors*—also “reclaim” valuable real estate by re-appropriating it to more profitable use. Herding bulldozers and graders into the last natural corners of the peninsula, theirs has been a quest to pave every square inch of available habitat. The dense thickets of saw palmettos, scrub pines, and mangroves were first cleared to make farms, which gave way to homesteads, which were sold off for businesses and housing developments, now razed for high-rise condominiums. Or perhaps it is the hurricanes that periodically assail the coasts, sweeping them clean of not only human dwellings but also the ample flora that gives the place its name.

Regardless, Florida is and seemingly always has been changing, often disappearing and reappearing in different configurations that result in an ethereal,

mirage-like sense of place, difficult to isolate and identify. Mark Derr, author of *Some Kind of Paradise: A Chronicle of Man and the Land in Florida* (1998), has described this refractive essence. “In human terms, Florida is as much a state of mind as of being, a land of imagination where fantasies come true,” he writes, “although the nature of the dreams, like the land itself, has changed with shifting social fashions.”¹ Gary Mormino echoes this idea in *Land of Sunshine, State of Dreams: A Social History of Modern Florida* (2005):

A powerful symbol of renewal and regeneration, Florida’s dreamscape constantly shifts... Malleable, accessible, and seemingly inexhaustible, the Florida landscape can be anything that humans want it to be... Shifting images and associations cast and recast Florida as a haven for the elderly, the fruit and winter vegetable basket for North America, a citadel and arsenal, and the crossroads for the Americas... Reinventing Florida is a cottage industry.²

It is a peculiar phenomenon, this kaleidoscopic refashioning, which seems to relate to a spatial and temporal paradox: the

¹Mark Derr, *Some Kind of Paradise: A Chronicle of Man and the Land in Florida* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1998), 13.

²Gary Mormino, *Land of Sunshine, State of Dreams: A Social History of Modern Florida* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2005), 2-6.

more Florida builds and grows, the more it degrades and devolves. It is a simple yet elusive concept, not only knotted around issues of place, historical memory, and nostalgia but also tied to problems of authenticity and sustainability.

According to Yi-Fu Tuan, human action often turns on the way people respond to their physical setting—their perception of it and the value they place on it. Referring to the affective bond between people and place as *topophilia*, he argues that because humans are able to manipulate their surroundings, it is important when considering space and setting to take into account humankind’s affinity toward (or loathing of) any given environment.³ Tuan’s notion of *topophilia* applies directly in this instance, relating to a second paradox. Because Florida’s natural environment has been so tough on its inhabitants, efforts to tame the land have been undertaken with startling enthusiasm; however, a kind of nostalgic longing has often accompanied such efforts. Sometimes this longing resembles a desire to halt these efforts even as residents welcome “progress.” In this way, change is relentlessly pursued even as it is resisted.

In a place that periodically reinvents itself, how does development affect the relationship between people and their

³Yi-Fu Tuan, *Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perception, Attitudes, and Values* Morningside ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 4.

physical environments? To answer this question and explain its related paradoxes—first, how a geographical space disappears as it expands, and second, how people in that space embrace change even as they loathe it—we might examine those places that have grown and gone, yet still remain. What vestiges of the built environment speak to such paradoxes better than abandoned settlements? In light of J. B. Jackson’s observation about the “necessity for ruins,” ghost towns take on extra meaning as limbo localities: historical bridges between yesterday and today.⁴

Symbols of the Old West, ghost towns evoke frontier images of tumbleweeds and weather-beaten storefronts, long abandoned to the ravages of time. Hollywood westerns have made ghost towns iconic, and while fewer and fewer remain, some still dot the American Southwest. A few locales have even actively preserved them: Bannack, the territorial capital of Montana, and Bodie, one of the roughest of California’s mining towns, now draw tourists as state parks. Here visitors can stroll through entire towns, frozen in states of arrested decay.

Florida, however, has no such places. Here ghost towns have no official historical value or significance. They are in fact barely recognizable as ghost towns, often identifiable only by a dilapidated building or

⁴John Brinckerhoff Jackson, *The Necessity for Ruins, and Other Topics* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980).

two, a glimpse of weed-covered foundation, or a small pile of rubble. Speeding down Interstate 95 or the Florida Turnpike, few tourists are aware of the state's ghost towns, often layered beneath or sandwiched between more recent settlements. In fact, many native-born Floridians would be surprised to learn there are more than two hundred ghost towns here, most dating from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

These remnants serve an important function, beyond any inherent architectural value or significance as economically viable heritage sites. As traces of earlier built environments, as repositories of memory, and as tangible links to past human presence, they signify a lack of constancy while still often providing a means to imagine a bygone era. They are the in-between spaces between living present and dead past, between rapid expansion and sustainable development, between amnesia and remembrance. Critically analyzing ghost towns with something other than antiquarian interest yields answers about how certain locales filter memory; intriguingly, these shadow places have a resonance that informs present-day discussions of growth and decline. With an abundance of ghost towns, Florida is indeed haunted, not by phantoms or specters but by sustainability issues that not only threaten the natural environment but also destabilize any sense of history.

To appreciate Florida's ephemeral nature, one must examine the uneasy relationship between the peninsula and its

human inhabitants: a tale of conflict and conquest, of competition and survival; a story of war, not only between cohabitants but also between people and the land itself; and also a history of transience and impermanence, of colonizers' heavy-handed intrusion into a land that fought and often rejected human presence. Little evidence remains of the thousands of years of habitation by Native Americans, and the state's built environment reflects little of its lengthy human history: while the land itself bears the imprint of human presence, there are few remnants left by people themselves in terms of buildings or structures. This seeming impermanence—a lack of lasting built environment, coupled with human transience—may help explain Florida's ongoing sustainability issues and perpetual “disappearance.”

Florida had been a state for only sixteen years when, on the eve of the Civil War, it seceded and left the Union in 1861; after the war, development began in earnest. As white pioneers made a place for themselves, a certain fondness replaced the disdain so often conveyed by earlier explorers and travelers in Spanish Florida—even as these recent arrivals attacked the land and aggressively reshaped it to suit their needs. This nostalgia is evident in the writings of Charles W. Pierce, who recorded what life was like for the first white settlers to live in and around Lake Worth, in modern-day Palm Beach County. His account, *Pioneer Life in Southeast Florida*, was written in the late 1920s and early 1930s as a memoir. Published in 1970, amidst a resurgence of interest in Palm

Beach's not-so-distant past, the book is now regarded as a classic: an authentic account of bygone days, from the arrival of his family in 1872 to 1893, when Henry Flagler extended his railroad along the Florida coast after building the luxurious Royal Poinciana Hotel in Palm Beach the year before. In those twenty-three years the region morphed from a virtually uninhabited wilderness to a sophisticated tourist destination, a playground for the *über*-rich. Even as he was writing *Pioneer Life*, Pierce recognized that the Florida he remembered, the Florida he had helped to create, was a faint memory, an echo of something long since passed: as more and more people arrived, bringing with them the trappings of civilization, change eclipsed the Pierces and the other settlers of South Florida. "By 1893," he wrote, "before the coming of the railroad, the people of the lake, especially those who had arrived in the seventies, no longer thought they were living on a frontier."⁵

Pierce went on to describe the daily mail, express, and passenger service aboard the steamer *Hypoluxo*; the governmental weather stations and telegraph lines crisscrossing the region; and the post offices, general stores, tourist hotels, boardinghouses, and weekly newspaper that had sprung up as symbols of a new age, harbingers of more change to follow. "Nonetheless, the coming of Flagler and his

⁵Charles W. Pierce, *Pioneer Life in Southeast Florida* (Coral Gables: University of Miami Press, 1970), 250-251.

railroad, the building of the big hotels, and the founding of the city of West Palm Beach brought an end to an era," he concluded. "The pioneer days, like the little boats with their 'wings of the wind,' remained only as a pleasant memory."⁶ Interestingly, what many historians cite as the beginning of the settlement of Florida—the building of Flagler's railroad—Pierce remembered as the end. Undoubtedly, there were Seminoles who looked on the pre-Pierce days with similar nostalgia; but, the larger point is that Pierce's Florida had already vanished by the time of his death in 1939, at the age of seventy-five.

The period described by Pierce brought enormous change to Florida, some of it captured by Ralph Middleton Munroe, a photographer who chronicled the tropical frontier on dry glass plate negatives.⁷ Pierce and Munroe not only recorded the creation of modern Florida but also—seemingly cognizant of something lost in the fury of construction, development, and change— noted the passing of its precursor. The themes in Pierce's book and in Munroe's images are ones of transience and impermanence, as if the very land were shifting and changing beneath the feet of

⁶Ibid; see also William E. McGoun, *Southeast Florida Pioneers: The Palm and Treasure Coasts* (Sarasota, Fl.: Pineapple Press, 1998).

⁷For examples, see Arva Moore Parks, *The Forgotten Frontier: Florida Through the Lens of Ralph Middleton Munroe* (Miami: Banyan Books, 1977).

those who would attempt to live there. In fact, the land *was* changing, or more accurately, the land was changed, as pioneers worked to shape it to fit their needs and wants. In the southern part of the state, the developers who followed the surveyors saw a vast area of rich muck lands perfect for the growth of sugar cane and other crops. In the Everglades they perceived not a unique and wondrous ecosystem but a watery wasteland to be drained, parceled, and farmed. Those who succeeded—like Henry Disston, who drained the wetlands from the Kissimmee River to Lake Okeechobee, thereby opening a vast acreage to farming and development—were considered great men.⁸ Thus began a series of massive engineering enterprises that carried unforeseen ecological consequences, many of them disastrous in scope and scale. Lakes were diked, rivers channelized, marshes dredged. Wildlife suffered, entire ecosystems coughed and sputtered, but as the swamplands dried up, economic opportunity flooded in.⁹

⁸Joe Knetsch, *Faces on the Frontier: Florida Surveyors and Developers in the Nineteenth Century* (Cocoa: Florida Historical Society Press, 2006), 211.

⁹For more on the water-control projects of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, see William Ross McCluney, *The Environmental Destruction of South Florida* (Coral Gables, FL: University of Miami Press, 1971); see also Jack E. Davis, *Paradise Lost?: The Environmental History of Florida* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2005).

The result was a schizophrenic kind of development that mirrored the boom-bust cycles of the Old West. It is helpful, perhaps, to consider Florida as a kind of “non-western” western state in this regard. The Florida frontier existed a little later than the frontier of the American West but the trappings were similar, with pioneers, homesteads, and even cowboys and cattle drives; in fact, many of Frederic Remington’s emblematic images of cowboying come not from Texas but from Florida in 1895, when he painted iconic images of larger-than-life cowboys like Bone Mizell, who in turn enhanced the cowboy myth.¹⁰ Some local economies—from sponge diving in Tarpon Springs to plume hunting in the Everglades—were distinctly non-western, but the enterprises were familiarly extractive and cyclical in nature, expanding and collapsing in rapid succession; more traditional economic activities included lumber cutting and turpentine harvesting in the pinewoods, and phosphate mining in the southwest part of the state. Many business ventures lost steam as quickly as they were created, and the surrounding communities suffered accordingly. The result was little different from the camps in the American West which depopulated as miners, having chipped and blasted great veins of silver or panned mountain streams for gold crumbs, looked elsewhere for precious metal. The make-or-

¹⁰On Remington and Mizell, see Stuart McIver, *Glimpses of South Florida History* (Miami: Florida Flair Books, 1988), 114-115.

break economies of frontier Florida launched some communities into lasting success while dooming others to failure, and the state was left an inordinate number of abandoned settlements, much like Nevada or Colorado.

In *The Ghost Towns & Side Roads of Florida*, James Warnke explains how entire towns comprised of houses, hotels, and businesses simply vanished, “so that today one is hard put even to find the spot where the village existed.”¹¹ Perhaps there was a storm or bad winter; towns in Marion, Lake, and Sumter counties, for example, were particularly hard-hit by the “Big Freeze” of 1894-1895. Perhaps the railroad (or later, the interstate) bypassed the town, or perhaps a local business closed its doors; regardless, it was usually hard economics that killed settlements.

Such places fall into three categories, according to Warnke. First, there is what might be called the classic ghost town, which flourished then died with few traces of its former existence. Second, there are towns once thriving and prosperous, now dwindling and in decline, with a handful of residents still living there; as Warnke notes, such places should probably be called something other than “ghost towns” in deference to current inhabitants. Third, there are named spots on maps--railroad stops, junctions, and so forth that needed to

¹¹James Warnke, *The Ghost Towns and Side Roads of Florida* (Boynton Beach, Fl.: Roving Photographers & Associates, Inc., 1978), 9.

be called something--that were never really towns at all. While the first category is undoubtedly the most interesting, there is a fourth possibility that Warnke does not consider: the town swallowed by other towns, now superimposed on top of preexisting communities.¹²

Period maps, often contradicting one another, depict an ephemeral place in constant transition. A Rand-McNally map from 1910 of the newly formed Palm Beach County shows a number of towns that no longer exist, places such as Tantie, Fort Van Swearinger, Rio, Aberdeen, Gomez, Jupiter Station, and Yamato; however, a 1910 Hammond map of the same area shows *other* settlements that no longer exist, namely Fruita and Munyons Island. A 1916 map by the National Map Company depicts Gosling, Waveland, Mulford, Likely, and West Jupiter, none of which remain. A 1921 map by the L. L. Poates Company adds Ritta and Gladecrest while subtracting other towns; a 1932 U. S. Geological Survey map includes Rood, Kelsey City, and a smattering of new settlements around Lake Okeechobee such as Chosen and Kraemer. Every few years new places were popping up as others disappeared. None of these places appear on modern-day maps, but,

¹²Ibid. For more, see Steve Rajtar, *Historic Photos of Florida Ghost Towns* (Nashville, Tenn.: Turner Publishing Co., 2010); see also Weona Cleveland, *Crossroad Towns Remembered: A Look Back at Brevard & Indian River Pioneer Communities* (Melbourne, Fl.: Florida Today, 1994) and <http://www.ghosttowns.com/fl>.

more tellingly, the lack of consistency from map to map seems to reflect a lack of agreement as to what constituted an actual town. Not so much scientifically accurate, geographical renderings of the topography, these historic maps are impressionistic snippets of a place in time, snapshots of a gone world.¹³

The land boom of the 1920s, made possible in part by Hamilton Disston's efforts to drain the Everglades, changed the area more than anything before it. Developers packaged and sold land in the same way citrus growers packed oranges, neatly boxed and ready for consumption. "Go to Florida," commanded *The Miamian* in 1925, "where enterprise is enthroned, where the silver circle is heaven's lavalier, and the full orbit its glorious pendant."¹⁴ In these heady get-rich-quick days, land was bought and sold quickly, and people flooded the lower peninsula. It was not until this period that a few observers began to speak of paradise lost, sensing trouble in the speed with which the subtropical wonderland was modernizing. John Kunkel Small, for

¹³The 1910 Rand-McNally and 1932 U. S. Geological Survey maps are archived in the Geography and Map Division of the Library of Congress; the 1916 National Map Company and 1921 L. L. Poates Company maps are in the private collection of Roy Winkelman. All are available online through the Florida Center for Instructional Technology at <http://fcit.usf.edu>.

¹⁴Frederick Lewis Allen, *Only Yesterday: An Informal History of the 1920s* (1931; reprint, New York: Harper Row, 1964), 225.

example, decried the deforestation he saw in *From Eden to Sahara: Florida's Tragedy* (1929). "Florida is being drained and burned to such an extent that it will soon become a desert," he cautioned. "Yesterday a botanical paradise. Tomorrow, the desert!"¹⁵ The writings of Marjory Stoneman Douglas also capture this tension neatly (her efforts, combined with Small's, would eventually help to create Everglades National Park). In *The Everglades: River of Grass* (1947), Douglas described not only the fishermen, plume hunters, and gator skimmers who commodified the environment but also the explosive growth of Miami during this same period. "The glitter, the whiteness, the play of light, the stimulus of the sun, the sense that a great city was building here made it impossible now for people to check ills growing greater," she wrote. "Times and events quickened and rushed forward, as a river gathered to the drag of a cataract."¹⁶

What emerged was a kind of love-hate relationship with the land: newcomers noted the natural beauty of Florida even as they ravaged it, and commented on how much preferable the older Florida was even as they rushed to embrace a newer

¹⁵John Kunkel Small, quoted in Bill Belleville, *Losing It All To Sprawl: How Progress Ate My Cracker Landscape* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2006), 92.

¹⁶Marjory Stoneman Douglas, *The Everglades: River of Grass* 50th Anniversary Edition (Sarasota, Fl.: Pineapple Press, 1997), 333.

“improved” version. While it may have been little more than hypocrisy that informed this relationship, it was more likely a kind of cognitive dissonance, perhaps a conflation of memory (the use of the past in conjunction with the present) and nostalgia (the rejection of the present for an imagined past). Christopher Lasch has described nostalgia as the “abdication of memory,” insofar as it “undermines the ability to make intelligent use of the past” by idealizing what happened “outside time, frozen in unchanging perfection.” Whether an abdication of memory or a romanticization of it, this nostalgia failed to prompt a reevaluation of the meaning of progress in frontier Florida, where there persisted an inability or unwillingness to halt development—as if the present itself were inherently lacking. In such an implicit deficit model, the here-and-now was doomed, never to be good enough.¹⁷

Accordingly, the 1920s land scramble in Florida resulted in more than a few places begun with high hopes that never materialized. To illustrate, the town of Quay, north of Vero Beach in Indian River County, had changed its name from Woodley in the early 1910s to honor Senator Matthew Quay, whose efforts led Congress to authorize the first dredging of the Indian River Lagoon for a navigation channel.

¹⁷Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1991), 82-83.

When the name did not lure land developers, townspeople again changed the name to Winter Beach—just as the land boom ended. The town was destined to remain a small unincorporated community, now a ghost town. Other settlements turned on the hopes and dreams of single individuals. When George End, for example, started a business to can rattlesnake meat on State Route 92 in Hillsborough County, he made it the center of a town aptly named Rattlesnake, which soon consisted of the cannery, a general store, a post office, and a roadside “snake-pit” attraction. Relocating from Arcadia with his wife and two sons in 1937, End started a mail-order business that was quite lucrative until 1944, when he died from—somewhat predictably—snakebite. The town was annexed to the city of Tampa in the 1950s, though the name still appears on certain maps.¹⁸

Where there are ghost towns, one is mindful of ghosts—quite literally, in certain corners of the state. Cassadaga, with its large number of mediums and spiritual advisors, has been called the “Psychic Capital of the World.” Founded in the 1890s by a trance medium named George Colby, the Cassadaga Spiritualist Camp attracted those intent on communicating with spirits beyond this material world; today, this small town in Volusia County

¹⁸On Quay, see <http://www.ghosttowns.com/states/fl/quay.html>; on Rattlesnake, see <http://www.ghosttowns.com/states/fl/rattlesnake.html>

continues to beckon psychics and spiritualists of all sorts. St. Augustine, with its nightly ghost tours, has long claimed to be not only the oldest city in the United States but also the most haunted. Not to be outdone, Key West—originally called Cayo Hueso, or “Bone Island”—also claims an inordinate share of apparitions.

Of course, one need not believe in ghosts to appreciate the nature of hauntings, which are inherently linked to sense of place. Paranormal investigators might describe a haunting as a worldly visitation by an otherworldly being: a recurring, quasi-corporeal manifestation of a spirit in a given place. Less spooky definitions simply describe a place habitually frequented; accordingly, we call places we used to visit often our old “haunts” and hangouts. On yet another level, a haunting is little more than a lasting impression; in this sense we speak of being “haunted” by a painful memory or incident. Central to any definition of haunting, however, is the sensation of remembrance occurring in a given locale—the notion of place. Certain localities evoke more of a sense of place than others, perhaps because of certain memories lingering there; therefore, we might think of a haunting as a memory imprint, a time stamp on a particular place. Few would deny that places such as Senlac Hill, where English knights locked shields to face the Norman advance at the Battle of Hastings in 1066, or New York City’s Ground Zero, site of the September 11th terrorist attacks and footprint of the World Trade Center’s Twin Towers, have more historical weight—more *gravitas*—than other places which conjure less

emotion or sentiment. Are they not haunted, not because of the large-scale loss of life which occurred there, but rather because they keep a certain historical memory? In visiting the site of the greatest American Civil War battle, for example, it is easy to feel the ghosts of Gettysburg—not as apparitions or spirits, per se, but as a uniform atmosphere thick with presence and past meaning. Such hauntings are not limited to battlefields or sites of great tragedy. Walden Pond, for example, is haunted by Thoreauvian descriptions of quiet beauty; Muir Woods by the statuesque majesty of redwoods; and the U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C. by palpitations of weighty decisions, of political power wielded by influential statesmen.

In this light, it is possible to see how Florida is haunted by past visions of future grandeur, of dreams and schemes, all trading on historical sense of place, on environmental capital, and on the land itself. The second paradox—that people embrace change even as they loathe it—enables a haunting sense of loss which makes progress troublesome: it is the wistfulness for Florida’s pasts that defines many of its presents in the modern era. In this sense, the “real” Florida is that sometimes romanticized version of the peninsula that exists in a liminal state, wavering somewhere between reality and the ghost world, between past and present, relating to what Ronald Lee Fleming has called “the

capacity of the tangible physical environment to live on in the mind.”¹⁹

Al Burt, a columnist for the *Miami Herald*, has described this liminal state as what he calls the “Tropic of Cracker”: vestiges of “native” Florida that persist and echo in the midst of fast-paced modernization. Tied to the land, the place described by Burt exists in thought and imagination. “The Tropic of Cracker survives in myth, memory, and love of natural Florida,” he writes. “It exists more in the mind than in geography, more in the memory than in the sight, more in attitude than in encounter.”

In the Tropic of Cracker there are no parallels staked out, circling the earth at certain degrees and so many minutes above the equator, marking a zone and rendering scholarly identification of the climate and range of life. The Tropic of Cracker has no boundaries. In Florida it simply occurs, as unbidden as sandspurs or wildflowers, rooting in the minds of Floridians who have links to their past and kinship to their native heritage.²⁰

¹⁹Ronald Lee Fleming, *The Art of Placemaking: Interpreting Community Through Public Art and Urban Design* (London: Merrell, 2007), 17.

²⁰Al Burt, *The Tropic of Cracker* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1999), xv, 3.

Acknowledging that it is essentially an invention, Burt describes the Tropic of Cracker as “a sense of Florida,” a kind of collective memory tied to place. Loss, gain, and potential cannot be measured except by comparison with the good and bad of what life had been like, he argues; without remembering how it was, one cannot know how it could be. It is accompanied by a certain degree of longing, an “idealized vision of home.” The Tropic of Cracker represents “what remains of the Florida that needed no blueprint or balance sheet for its creation,” Burt notes, “that was here before there was a can opener or a commercial or a real estate agent;” but in his estimation it is more than mere nostalgia. “It is the feeling that here there has been something special that should not be lost or forgotten, something not just confined to the library or to a museum or to a vault,” he concludes. “There is a desire to cull the best of heritage and weave it back into daily life.”²¹

Burt is one of several journalists comprising a cadre of writers mourning the loss of native Florida.²² However,

²¹Burt, *Tropic of Cracker*, 4, 13, 22-23.

²²Others include Ernest Lyons, Jeff Klinkenberg, and Bill Belleville. See Ernest Lyons, *The Last Cracker Barrel* (New York: Newspaper Enterprise Association, 1976); Jeff Klinkenberg, *Real Florida: Key Lime Pies, Worm Fiddlers, A Man Called Frog, and Other Endangered Species* (Asheboro, N.C.: Down Home Press, 1993); Jeff Klinkenberg, *Dispatches from the Land of Flowers: A Snake Man, a Sad Poet, a Lightning Stalker, and Other Stories About Real Florida* (Asheboro, N.C.: Down Home Press, 1996); Jeff Klinkenberg, *Pilgrim*

journalists are not the only ones to note the passing of what they see as an older, more authentic order. Today the state park system beckons visitors to see the “Real Florida”: the wild landscape quite different from the Disney-fied Florida more familiar to tourists. Photo Salon, a group of artists in West Palm Beach, has attempted to capture the people, places, and things they find most interesting, calling their latest exhibition “Vanishing Florida.”²³ Such characterizations are only possible in a place that transformed from under populated hinterland to megastate so quickly, a place where the built environment almost wholly supplanted nature. Perhaps no one can bear the notion that the “real” Florida might be the soulless nothingscape of concrete and steel visible from the highway; if so, each invocation of the real Florida may relate not so much to nostalgia as to a kind of guilt, an unease about setting in motion large-scale habitat loss, a displacement of people (not only Native Americans but also “crackers,” or native-born white Floridians) as well as animals.

in the Land of Alligators: More Stories About Real Florida (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2008); Jeff Klinkenberg, *Seasons of Real Florida* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2009); and Bill Belleville, *Losing It All To Sprawl: How Progress Ate My Cracker Landscape* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2006).

²³For more on the Photo Salon exhibit, see <http://www.vanishingflorida.net/>. For other uses of the term “vanishing Florida,” see Susan Harb, “Florida’s Quirky Attractions Try to Stay Afloat,” *Washington Post* (January 14, 2007): 1.

As the older Florida recedes, musings about what is real and what is not are perhaps inevitable, relating to yet another paradox, a third contradiction: Florida is at once both the oldest and newest state, a place whose built environment reflects little of its human history. In Massachusetts, where tiny houses in seaside villages like Marblehead and Braintree date to the 1620s, the past is living present; in Virginia, denizens speak in hushed tones about the wishes of the Founding Fathers as if they were still lingering in the next room (at the University of Virginia, faculty, students, and administrators alike consistently invoke the desires of “Mr. Jefferson” in formulating contemporary university policy). In Florida, there are comparatively few traces of the past—a curiosity in one of the oldest gateways to North America. As the state arrives at its quincennial, celebrating the five-hundredth anniversary of Ponce de Leon’s landing in 1513, there is little indication that people have been here as long as they have. There are few old buildings, few reminders: even graveyards in places outside St. Augustine and Key West seem few and far between.

In such an environment, ghost towns represent something unique, not as heritage sites or opportunities for historic preservation or even places of archaeological import, but as symbols of a preservation-less environment: a place where preservation exists by accident, not design. Florida is, in fact, a state largely bypassed by the U.S. historic preservation movement, pioneered in the late 19th and

early 20th centuries in places such as Mount Vernon, Virginia and Charleston, South Carolina. The Florida Trust for Historic Preservation—the state’s only statewide advocacy organization for historic preservation and its only statewide, not-for-profit organization—was not established until 1978. Until then, historic preservation was limited to a few specific locales (like St. Augustine and Key West, the most iconic of Florida’s preserved places).

Historic preservation never really caught on here, not only because of the newness of the state but also because Floridians exist in a rarified kind of American Dream, an ever-grasping quest for bigger-better-faster. Why would the dreamer bother with history when feverishly focused on the future? While the past reassures and helps those who study it to avoid mistakes, it also slows presentist intent, with tradition acting as a brake on progress. Perhaps it is inevitable that preservation would be an afterthought in a place whose subtropical forests hid not only El Dorado but also the legendary Fountain of Youth; where age has equated not with past glory but with decay; and where patina still signifies tarnish—less point of pride than eyesore.

There is little room for tribute to the past in a place focused on things to come; however, those tributes that do remain often speak to this forward-looking tendency, and crumbling monuments of past futurescapes dot the state. A weirdly fascinating subset of ghost towns, these ruined memorials of futurism crumble and decay as historic

visions of tomorrows that never materialized—the past present of future perfect. Xanadu, a conceptual, organically-shaped house constructed with blown polyurethane and inflated balloons, was intended to showcase computers and automation in the American home. Begun in Kissimmee in 1979, Xanadu remained a popular tourist attraction in the 1980s, but as technology began to outstrip the conveniences featured inside, including large-screen video projectors and home security systems, the bubble-dome house quickly felt outdated, its vision frozen in time even as the building itself dilapidated. Closed in 1996, the building fell into disrepair until its demolition in 2005. Other examples are no less dramatic in their expectations and hope for tomorrow. While not a ghost town, Disney’s original EPCOT was an instant anachronism, an uncomfortably outmoded vision that almost totally miscalculated the contours of twenty-first century life in the United States: plenty of *Jetsons*-esque rocket cars but no cell phones. Focused on sunny dreams of peace and prosperity through technology, Walt Disney’s sharpest Imagineers still failed to anticipate the Internet. Excepting the autonomous, vacuuming Roomba, today there are scant few robots to do the housework, and EPCOT—the Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow—has had to constantly evolve and update to reflect the present, let alone the future.²⁴

²⁴Tom Halfhill, “Computers in the Home: 1990,” *Compute!* 31 (December 1982): 16-24; see

Thus, as spatial lessons in sustainability, ghost towns evoke not only the past but also the future. As Carl Becker pointed out in his 1931 presidential address to the American Historical Association:

[T]o be oriented in our little world of endeavor we must be prepared for what is coming to us... and to be prepared for what is coming to us it is necessary, not only to recall certain past events, but to anticipate (note I do not say predict) the future. Thus from the specious present, which always includes more or less of the past, the future refuses to be excluded; and the more of the past we drag into the specious present, the more an hypothetical, patterned future is likely to crowd into it also.²⁵

“[M]emory of past and anticipation of future events work together, go hand in hand as it were

also Roy Mason, Lane Jennings, and Robert Evans, *Xanadu: The Computerized Home of Tomorrow and How It Can Be Yours Today!* (New York: Acropolis Books, 1983). On EPCOT, see Richard Beard, *Walt Disney's EPCOT Center: Creating the New World of Tomorrow* (New York: H.N. Abrams, 1985). Several websites have discussed EPCOT's evolution, including Epcot Central (<http://epcot82.blogspot.com/2006/10/seeing-into-future.html>), Epcot Center: A History of the Future (<http://webcot.michaelcrawford.com/flash.htm>), and Lost Epcot (<http://www.lostepcot.com/index.html>).

²⁵Carl Becker, Annual Address of the President of the American Historical Association, delivered in Minneapolis, December 29, 1931; reprinted in the *American Historical Review* 37 n 2 (1931): 221–36; also available at http://www.historians.org/info/aha_history/clbecker.htm.

in a friendly way, without disputing over priority and leadership,” he concluded.²⁶ In championing the subjectivity of historical relativism, in which the past is rendered relative and relational, Becker might have recognized ghost towns as mediating not only historical memory but also what Alvin Toffler has termed “future shock”: too much change in too short a period of time. As references with no referents in the contemporary landscape, ghost towns also shade into what Jean Baudrillard has described as simulacra and simulation, or hyperreality; the hyperreal condition, or reality by proxy, surely destabilizes any sense of historical order, if history is a record of events ordered according to a given criterion (usually chronology). As visual cues in the built environment, ghost towns provide links to the past; but as hauntings, or memory imprints on geography, they also mold historical relativism as much as topophilia. Thus it is hardly surprising that ghost towns—existing at the intersections of living present, dead past, and imminent future—haunt the contemporary landscape in their liminality.²⁷

“What is most striking about Florida,” Mormino has written, “is how quickly things changed.” It is a place

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷See Alvin Toffler, *Future Shock* (New York: Random House, 1970) and Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. by Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994).

defined by periodically reinventing itself, a place of “instant cities... a society in flux.”²⁸ Burt has described how Floridians characteristically look to the next big thing in “The Next Florida,” a chapter of *The Tropic of Cracker* in which he writes:

There have been many false starts, corrections or half-corrections, and restarts. Progress has been ragged and incomplete, but it continues. Grandiose schemes came along with regularity, new things or new ideas with an appetite for eating away at things natural for dubious gains, but each marvelous new answer seemed to bring with it a set of three or four new problems, each requiring another new answer that also carried multiple problems. As we made progress, sometimes it seemed we fell further behind.”²⁹

In creating one paradise, Floridians destroyed another. Where the two ideals intersected, one finds ghosts—figurative and sometimes literal manifestations of endeavor and conquest. It is the curse of living in an idealized setting, a Shangri-La that trades on the place’s own natural beauty and abundance.

“People who live in a ‘carpentered’ world,” Tuan observes, “are susceptible to

²⁸Mormino, *Land of Sunshine, State of Dreams*, 5, 7.

²⁹Burt, *Tropic of Cracker*, 227-228.

different kinds of illusion from those who live in an environment lacking in orthogonality.” For him, the furnishing of an ideal world is a matter of removing the defects of the real one. “Paradises have a certain family likeness because the excesses of geography (too hot or too cold, too wet or too dry) are removed,” he continues. “In all of them, plants and animals useful and friendly to man abound.”³⁰ Tuan might agree that Florida—a vacation destination and “some kind of paradise,” as Derr has called it—is a carpentered world made livable by humans intent on tempering this wild land. While barely moderating its extremes of heat and humidity, modern Florida is still beset by paradoxes relating to its inhabitants’ quests for earthly perfection—quests that have most often ended not in Gardens of Eden, as some visionaries hoped, but in testaments to human imperfection.

In fact, to the third paradox (that Florida is simultaneously the oldest and newest state, with the newest built environment and the oldest record of human habitation) may be added a fourth, neatly illustrated as before by Douglas. In *The Everglades: River of Grass*, she recounts how Frank Hamilton Cushing, “one of the most brilliant and original ethnologists” of the late nineteenth century, excavated Marco Key as he followed reports of prehistoric Calusa Indian artifacts, partially uncovered by the land drainers. Groping in the muck,

³⁰Tuan, *Topophilia*, 246-247.

he uncovered pottery, tools, weapons, and jewelry:

All the carved wooden objects showed, in the light, the original paint, black, white, gray-blue, and red. The muck had preserved them exactly as they had been, blown down, he began to think, in some hurricane that must have destroyed the whole village.

But as he lifted them and washed them off, in the brilliant sun he saw to his horror that as they dried they began to disintegrate.³¹

In finding the artifacts Cushing was destroying them, but much like the Calusas themselves and the bounteous ecosystem upon which they relied, no one much missed natural Florida until it was gone. One wonders if, to appreciate something fully, one must first lose it.

In the case of Florida, few paused to question the nature of progress. What does “progress” really mean, exactly? Only recently—perhaps only since the 1996 Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan, or CERP, and major efforts to dechannelize the Kissimmee River—have Floridians asked whether it entails something other than boundless growth; yet, development still continues, more or less unchecked. If ghost towns serve as monuments to caution, then the entire region

of Central and South Florida is itself a kind of giant ghost town—not devoid of inhabitants, but certainly symbolic of the consequences of rapid overdevelopment.

While sometimes tragic, however, this story is not in itself a declension narrative. To restore the world to something like its former beauty, “there has to be that interval of neglect, there has to be discontinuity,” writes Jackson, continuing:

There has to be (in our new concept of history) an interim of death or rejection before there can be renewal and reform... The old farmhouse has to decay before we can restore it and lead an alternate lifestyle in the country; the landscape has to be plundered and stripped before we can restore the natural ecosystem; the neighborhood has to be a slum before we can rediscover and gentrify it.³²

Ghost towns serve in this capacity as necessary “intervals of neglect,” reminding us of dreams and possibilities as much as miscues and missteps. In this sense, the built environment—along with human presence and nature—helps to reorient not only place but also history as well. The past itself becomes the most surreal of subjects as historical change accelerates, making it possible to see new beauty in that which is vanishing.

³¹Douglas, *The Everglades*, 308.

³²Jackson, *The Necessity for Ruins*, 102.