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Southward Expansion: The Myth of the West in the Promotion of Florida, 1876-1900

“Florida to-day affords the best opening in the world for young men of small means and great industry.” (Grant quoted in Gulf Coast Land Company (GCLC), 1885, pp. 16-17). So declared former President Ulysses S. Grant, in 1880, after an extensive tour of the Southern states and the Caribbean, during which he marvelled at Florida’s size – “an area greater than New York, Massachusetts, and Connecticut combined” – as well as its agricultural possibilities, especially in terms of semi-tropical fruit and sugar production. (GCLC, 1885, pp. 16-17). At the time of Grant’s visit, however, Florida languished, due to a combination of factors shared by the other ex-Confederate states – including poor infrastructure and public services, dilapidated railroads, and a shortage of capital – in addition to a particularly acute lack of people: despite being the second-largest state east of the Mississippi, Florida had the second-smallest population. (Rabinowitz, 1992; Woodward, 1997; Proctor, 1996; Arsenault & Mormino, 1988). A comparison of Florida’s population density and growth with that of its two neighbouring states, from 1840 to 1900, indicates how under-populated the state appeared throughout the period: (Anon., *Historical Statistics*, pp. 1-180, 1-213, 1-217).

	Alabama		Georgia		Florida	
Year	Population	Persons per sq/m.	Population	Persons per sq/m.	Population	Persons per sq/m.
1840	590,756	11.52	691,392	11.77	54,477	0.99
1860	964,201	18.80	1,057,286	18.00	140,424	2.56
1880	1,262,505	24.62	1,542,180	26.26	269,493	4.91
1900	1,828,697	35.66	2,216,331	37.74	528,542	9.63
Increase in population and persons per sq/m (1840-1900)	1,237,941	24.14	1,524,939	25.97	474,065	8.64

Indeed, as George Pozzetta (1974, p. 165) observed, “in no other period of Florida's past...have residents of the state attempted to entice settlers southward with a greater sense of urgency and need than in the decades following the Civil War”. With the latent resources provided by the state’s climate and soils, however, Grant felt, progress was held back merely by a lack of “people and enterprise, both of which [Florida] is rapidly obtaining”. (GCLC, 1885, pp. 16-17). Thus, in a reworking of Horace Greeley’s famous 1865 address, “Go West, Young Man”, Grant stated that any youthful man, however limited his finances, could, with “great industry” and perhaps a little luck, achieve success and independence by heading south and settling a small tract of Florida land.¹

Grant’s report, which featured, initially, in the *Philadelphia Ledger*, was, unsurprisingly, referred to in numerous publications disseminated by Florida promotional bodies – notably, railroads, land companies and immigration agencies, as well as individual boosters, seeking to attract settlers. (GCLC, 1885, pp. 16-17; Foss, 1886, p. 6; Barbour, 1882, p. 3; ‘The South’ Publishing Company (SPC), 1884, p. 8). For the Florida State Bureau of Immigration’s 1882 guide for settlers, the representative of Putnam County praised the “truth and soberness” of General Grant’s “opinion that the fruit production of semi-tropical Florida would soon outweigh in value the grain harvests of the greatest of the Northwestern States” (Anon. in Robinson, 1882, p. 170). Indeed, Grant’s opinion of Florida as the “best opening” for young, often poor, men, willing to work to improve their condition and, in the process, to develop a “new” land, is representative of a significant strand of the state’s promotion. Whether or not Grant’s appraisal influenced Hamilton Disston, a Philadelphia capitalist engaged in drainage operations in south Florida, into purchasing four million acres of state land, the following

year, is unknown; for Disston's land companies, however, Grant's description became a useful endorsement for their product. (Davis, 1939, pp. 201-211).² An 1885 pamphlet published by Disston's Chicago-based Gulf Coast Land Company reproduced Grant's words in their entirety, before expanding on them:

“We are frequently asked how much capital is required to make a start in Florida. This is a difficult question to answer, but on general principles a start in Florida costs no more and often less than in the west...*Everything depends upon the man*; some have tact to turn everything into cash, while others walk over dollars without knowing it. Energy, industry and common sense are needed, and pay as well in Florida as anywhere in America.” [Emphasis in original] (1885, p. 20).

One year later, a guidebook writer, after visiting peninsular Florida, stated, “I never appreciated until I saw this soil and its product, the truth and force of General Grant's letter on Florida.” (McClure in Anon. 1900, pp. 17-18). The author concluded that “in ten years...the reclaimed lake lands will present the richest and most productive and prosperous settlement of Florida...and if its opportunities were properly understood by the large class of small farmers of the North who labour hard and unceasingly to gain only scant food and raiment with little enjoyment, there would be a sudden influx of new settlers.” (1900, pp. 17-18). In such depictions, which were increasingly commonplace in Florida promotion following Reconstruction, the state represented a kind of semi-tropical variant of the historic, idealised destination for American migrants: essentially, an ‘open’ land offering, to the sturdy agriculturist, ample prospects of social mobility and economic and social independence.

By examining this strand within Florida's promotion, I intend to demonstrate the importance, and limitations, of the myth of the West in Florida's developing self-image, and to locate this imagery within widespread desires and anxieties coursing through

American society, especially the North, in the later decades of the nineteenth century. This approach is taken, in part, because most recipients, along with many of the creators, of the booster literature were, themselves, Northerners; thus, the promotional imagery needs to be studied in the context of Northern society. (Current, 1983). Although clearly exaggerating, one travel writer, himself a New Yorker transplanted to Florida, stressed the importance, both perceived and real, of Northern ideas, as well as dollars, in Florida's post-war development: "It may almost be said with truth that Florida is a Northern State as regards population, so many Northerners are now residing there." (Tyler, 1880, p. 7).

Moreover, the value of the kind of promotional sources examined here may lie, predominantly, in the fact that, as advertisements of the state, they can be used, as Roland Marchand has argued in the context of product advertisements, for "*plausible inference* about popular attitudes and values" in society. (1986, p. xix). Florida boosters could be as guilty as any promoters of misrepresentation – an accusation which was frequently levelled against them. (See Thanet, 1886, pp. 187-195). One state promoter, writing in 1889, thus lamented "the seesaw of vilification and overpraise, and the general wholesale *inaccuracy*, that has been so lavishly written about Florida for the last twenty years". [Emphasis in original] (Davidson, 1889, p. 28). The level of "inaccuracy" should not be underestimated: as C. Vann Woodward wrote of Southern promotional literature, in general, of the period, "The historian, like the purchaser, should observe the most ancient rule of the market place, *caveat emptor*." (1977, p. 492). Yet Florida promoters were, also, fundamentally and financially, concerned with appealing to a broad spectrum of society, particularly in the wealthier, populous North-east. Thus, while their descriptions and statements about Florida must be viewed with some degree of scepticism, the

imagery used to engage Northern readers and to lure potential settlers, conveys desires and concerns that were, at the very least, deemed applicable to large numbers of Americans. Accordingly, an agent for the Florida Land and Improvement Company (FLIC), another of Disston's companies, stated: "The better classes of the northern States, now crowded so compactly in our large cities or working out subsistence in manufacturing villages and towns, because of the sharp competition of skilled ingenuity, may find here [in Florida] an opportunity to start abreast with developing enterprise." (FLIC, 1881, p. 33).

With different emphases, scholars have analysed the literary and visual representations of Florida in this period, from the most prominent themes featured in promotional publications (Spivack, 1982, pp. 429-438) to the state's image in American books, popular magazines, and art (Thompson, 2003, pp. 1-15; Mackle, 1977; Rowe, 1992). The extent to which Florida promoters evoked the myth of an individualistic West in order to sell their state, however, has largely been overlooked, despite being an important component in Florida's post-Reconstruction development. The evocation of the myth of the West in Florida's promotion reflected what David E. Nye has called "foundation narratives," which have shaped America's history and development since the colonial period: "The foundation stories that white Americans have told about the reconstruction and habitation of a new space are secular stories about what in many cultures are religious matters: how a group comes to dwell in a particular space, and how it wields power to transform the land and make a living from it." (2003, p. 6). Nye has emphasised the significance of technologies – axe, mill, railroad, and irrigation – in these narratives, and technologies, in particular railroad development and land reclamation,

were crucial to the settlement narratives of peninsular Florida. So, however, was the individualistic myth of the West, through which promoters sought to recast their southern state. By linking Florida with cherished western frontiers, state boosters plugged into a “foundation narrative” which appealed to both themselves and countless Northerners caught up in a rapidly industrialising America.

Central to my thesis is the argument that Florida was promoted and viewed through the lens of a fast-changing Northern society, where, many feared, industrialism, urbanisation, and the growth of corporations employing unskilled and potentially volatile labour, had radically changed the social fabric, reducing the opportunities for traditional American qualities of individualism and independence. (Richardson, 2007, pp. 148-186). Largely in response to these transformations – highlighted by instances of extreme social tension such as the Railroad Strike of 1877 and the Haymarket Bombing of 1886 – middle-class Americans cultivated a vision of the West as a place where “individuals could rise on their own through hard work”. (Richardson, 2007, p. 230). The challenge of industrialisation to America’s republican society and identity spurred intense longings for a return to a more independent and democratic society, which were fixated, naturally, upon the West, as the historic land of expansion and the frontier – and, more recently, upon those emblems of independent-living: cowboys. (Slotkin, 1985). My interest is in showing how promoters of one southern state, Florida, responded to, and harnessed, these longings, in an attempt to recast their state within the American imagination. The paper covers Florida’s critical developmental period from the end of Reconstruction, after the 1876 Democratic gubernatorial victory, to the turn of the century, by which time railroads

had penetrated the length of the peninsula and Jim Crow segregation was firmly entrenched in the state's social fabric.

In 1881, the departing Democratic Governor, George F. Drew (a native of New Hampshire), in an address to the State Legislature, called on promoters of Florida to “strengthen the efforts [to people the state] until the flood tide of immigration is turned from the West to Florida and the South.” (1881: 31). The onus of these promotional efforts, however, fell on private rather than state organizations, since the state government consistently struggled with finances: a short-lived State Bureau of Immigration, notably, was disbanded in 1891 due to a lack of funds. (Anon, 1891, p. 4). Railroad, land, and hotel companies – often financed by Northern capital and sometimes in tandem with state government agencies – became the driving forces in promoting Florida. Local boards of trade were also involved; although occasionally competing with each other in intra-state rivalries, they shared in trying to disseminate positive images of their state. These booster groups recognised that most Americans elsewhere had decidedly ambivalent views of Florida. Hot, southern, and savage, Florida was no place to settle. As one travel writer recalled in 1900:

“Of Florida the people of the North really knew but little until long after the close of the war. To the most of us it was a forbidden land. In the common imagination it was associated with the Everglades and the bloody war with the Seminoles; with swamps and marshes and cane brakes and their repulsive paludal populations of alligators and their scaly congeners of the ever moist lowlands...” (Presbrey, pp. 3-4).

In trying to overturn these conceptions and make good on Drew's hopes, promoters of Florida borrowed liberally from the mythology of the West. George Barbour, in a widely-read 1882 book, acknowledged that the state's “first and greatest need...is population,” before proclaiming Florida “beyond all other regions of America

the most favoured for poor people with little capital but of industrious disposition, able and willing to work”. (1882: 294). Barbour had first come to Florida as a correspondent for the *Chicago Times* and a companion to Grant on the former President’s 1880 tour of the state. Sufficiently enamoured with Florida to settle there himself, initially in the capacity of commissary for the South Florida Railroad and then as a promotional writer, Barbour interpreted Florida as a state hindered by a Southern past and yet eminently capable of a future of Western-type progress: “Look at the history of all our Western States....It was all the ‘wheel-barrow’ emigrant that opened up the great mining regions of the Rocky Mountains; then came the small storekeepers, then the wholesale dealers, then the bankers – the real capitalists – railroads, and telegraphs: and thus were States founded and solid prosperity established.” (1882: 294). Florida could see a repeat of this Western development, even improving upon it, since the southeastern state, “with its many and rapidly increasing lines of water and rail communications...., cheap rates, and rapid transit,” apparently offered superior advantages to the industrious “poor man” than did the “far-off, bleak, inhospitable West”. (1882: 295).

Barbour’s faith in the legitimacy of this comparison may have been genuine; after all, he had settled in Florida himself. The myth of the West, furthermore, evoked a narrative close to Americans’ hearts: expansion into and conquest of ‘virgin’ lands, leading to development and cultivation by enterprising frontiersmen and farmers. Hardship and toil, ultimately rewarded with independence, made the West a proving ground for character, a test of virtue in a nation which, industrialised and split between a conspicuously wealthy elite and a mass of impoverished labourers, appeared increasingly devoid of that quality. In the North, honest labour and sturdy agriculture, those mainstays

of Jefferson's idealised America, had been stripped of their dignity and worth – so observed J. F. Bartholf, of Manatee County, Florida: “It is to be regretted that there is so much fastidiousness and aristocratic pride in this hundredth year of our republic... It is contrary to the principles of a republic to make distinction in the classes of its citizens. A man who labours with his muscles is as much entitled to respect as one who seeks existence by his mental powers alone.” (1875: 94-95).

Such language appealed directly to what Eric Foner (1995) has described as the “free labour ideology”. In the 1850s, Foner explained, popular ideals regarding the right of individuals to pursue economic and social independence through their own labour constituted a “free labour” ideology, pervasive in Northern society, which crystallised into a political force during the crisis over the potential expansion of slavery westward. (1995, pp. 301-317). “In the free labour outlook,” Foner argued, “the objective of social mobility was not great wealth, but the middle-class goal of economic independence. For Republicans, ‘free labour’ meant labour with economic choices, with the opportunity to quit the wage-earning class. A man who remained... dependent on wages for his livelihood appeared almost as un-free as the southern slave.” (1995, pp. 16-17). If the West was the perceived haven of ‘free labour’ ideals, the South, in rebelling to defend slavery, represented the reason those very ideals were under threat. After the Civil War and the failures of Reconstruction, the free labour ideology underwent something of a transformation, as America, in general, and the Northeast, in particular, was further transformed from a rural to an urban-industrial society.³ With class divisions more apparent, “the dominant understanding of free labour [became] freedom of contract in the labour market, rather than ownership of productive property”. (1995, p. xxxvi). The

republican vision of America as a healthy, classless society of producers, with each man, ideally, owning a piece of land, was brutally exposed by the realities of corporate consolidation, worker and farmer discontent, and poverty-ridden cities. (Trachtenberg, 1982, pp. 4-9).

Yet, as Grant's much-repeated statement about Florida suggests, the notion, or hope, persisted that, for those Americans sufficiently "enterprising" in character, social mobility was still attainable – chiefly through migration away from the 'crowded' Northeast, to a less developed region; and, simultaneously, from a city to a farm. The region predominantly associated with this migration, however, remained the West, since, for most Americans, the celebrated destination for migrants seeking cheap land and a route to independence had always been the frontier 'West' (in various forms, whether the Appalachian West of the early national period, the Mississippi Valley of the 1830s and after, or, later, the Pacific West). (Billington & Ridge, 1982). The frontier had been hugely significant for antebellum Southerners, also, as, following the invention of the Cotton Gin, the 'cotton frontier' advanced across the Gulf Plains into Texas – as well as into portions of 'Middle' Florida. (Billington & Ridge, 1982, pp. 310-311; Baptist, 2002, pp. 16-36; Dick, 1964). Indeed, W. J. Cash argued that "it is impossible to conceive the great South as being, on the whole, more than a few steps removed from the frontier stage at the beginning of the Civil War." (1991, p. 10). Aspects, or consequences, of 'frontier' society and life, such as "lawlessness, crude anti-intellectualism, and suspicion of strangers," Cash argued, were profoundly important to the popular folkways of the Old South. (Wyatt-Brown in Cash, 1991, pp. xvii-xviii). Yet this expansive slave-based frontier was distinct from the image, and reality, of an emerging "Western garden,"

settled and worked by free men, and acting as safety valve to an over-populous East. (Smith, 1957, pp. 138-164, 234-246). This mythic West developed into a cherished, if somewhat illusory, part of American literature, and stood as a shining counterpoint to the divisive anomaly of the antebellum South as it was perceived by most Northerners: a slave-based economy in a self-proclaimed 'free' society, where vast holdings of landed wealth more closely resembled the corrupt aristocracies of the Old World. (Smith, 1957, pp. 165-178). The South suffered seriously by the comparison; while the West was inundated with settlers, the South consistently "wrestled with the problem of securing immigrants to fill up its sparsely settled territories, develop its resources, and supplement its labour supply." (Woodward, 1977, p. 297). Although, as James Dunlevy has suggested, 'Avoidance of the South Syndrome' on the part of immigrants may well have dwindled by 1900, with the legacies of slavery and sectional strife less a factor in the minds of migrants, the region nonetheless failed to attract settlers on any scale affirming the promotional claims that the South was becoming a new West. (Dunlevy, 1982, pp. 217-251).

In part this reflected the fact that – however divorced from reality it became – the myth of the West held immense significance to Americans – as suggested by Frederick Jackson Turner's famous claim, in 1893, that the "existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development". (1963, p. 1). Turner articulated a narrative of western settlement which, as Patricia Nelson Limerick and other New Western historians have argued, largely whitewashed the brutal treatment of ethnic and racial minorities by frontier whites. (Limerick, 1987). Yet it also epitomised national faith in the West as a well-

spring of American exceptionalism, with Turner stating that the “expansion westward with its new opportunities” and “perennial rebirth” had “furnish[ed] the forces dominating American character”. (1963, pp. 1-2). With the Census Report of 1890 claiming that the frontier no longer existed, however, Turner’s thesis also exemplified a profound anxiety in mainstream American society, which had been heightened by the industrial strikes, urban corruption, and social tensions of the period. (See Painter, 1987). As David Wrobel has shown, there emerged, from the 1870s onwards, “anxiety over the closing of the frontier” to the West, that region “that many Americans had, from their country’s earliest years, viewed... as an agrarian paradise, a Garden of Eden far removed from the evils of the Old World” – anxiety which crept into American thought as an unsettling reminder of those “evils” (poverty, oppression, overcrowding) which seemed increasingly prominent in American society. (1993, p. 4). The myth of the West involved a desire to cling on to those perennial tenets of American-ness, including agricultural independence and self-determination, which the rise of urban-industrial modernity appeared to be sweeping away.

Unsurprisingly, Florida, according to its land promoters, fitted ideally with these desires. Again and again they proclaimed that “although Florida boasts the oldest city in the United States (St. Augustine) it is essentially a *new* State,” an expanse of undeveloped, and therefore, cheap, lands, made accessible, in the 1880s especially, by new railroads, such that “especially to the young men of our large cities does Florida extend a willing hand, where with industry and sobriety early fortunes and honourable positions can be won”. (Jacques, 1877, p. 7; Anon., 1882a, p. 71). Calling for “city clerks” in the North to take up Florida citrus culture, Rev. T. W. Moore in 1886 declared,

“After a while would come the noble independence of a *free man*. Try it, young man, try it! Come from the crowded city to the country! Come South, come to Florida.” [Emphasis in original] (1886, p. 144). Florida offered a potential outlet for the agrarian individualism and social mobility which were once the boon of the West, and the very antithesis of the Old South. “It is an undisputed fact that all wealth originates from the soil through the toil and ingenuity of man,” declared Florida Immigration Agent Francis Irsch. (1891, p. 4). For Irsch, attracting settlers was predominantly a question of showing to the world that while “the agricultural and industrial classes of Europe and in some of the thickly populated centres of the United States are overworked, underpaid, and their general condition of life full of hardships,” “Florida has room, a beautiful climate and a competence for many of them if once fairly settled on her soil,” where “they will develop her resources,...enriching their neighbours as well as themselves.” (1891, p. 4).

Yet, while the state might be “new” for promoters, their vision of ‘southward expansion’ into Florida was indebted to various “old” conceptions of an idealised America – conceptions which served to distance Florida from social problems rampant in the North. Irsch’s speech, notably, featured a stinging rebuke of Northern industrial life which echoed antebellum southern pro-slavery rhetoric, which had attacked the harshness of Northern commercial society and praised slavery as a humane alternative. (See Finkelman, 2003, pp. 32-33). The rhetoric also resonated with that of the Farmer’s Alliance and Populist movements, which, in 1890, held an important convention in Ocala, Florida. The town’s boosters “lured the organisers of the supreme council with offers of cheap passenger fares, free lodging, tourist excursions” and a Semi-Tropical Exposition which showed off the region’s agricultural produce. (Postel, 2007, p. 106).

Although, as one scholar has written, “the history of Populism in Florida was short rather than sweet,” state promoters shared much of the Populist creed as a means of boosting Florida. (Abbey, 1938, p. 462). Irsch’s appeal to small farming mirrored that of Populists in recalling the ideology of Thomas Jefferson – so obsessed, in his time, over the corrupting influence of cities and the vital role of westward expansion in America’s destiny (McCoy, 1980):

“Concentrated capital and keen competition in the progressive centres of trade [in the Northern States] make the struggle for existence more arduous, and *the chances for advancement by mere industry and intelligence become fewer every day*,...the masses gravitate to the large cities from the country to live a more or less artificial existence, which those who preserve their natural good instincts desire to exchange for the free and independent life of the farmer...

[In the cities] the opportunities to save money enough to buy and conduct a farm, be it ever so small, are restricted by the monotonous work of the factory and the vitiated atmosphere of the tenement house and the relaxation of artificial pleasures, sought by way of compensation...consumes too much of their scant earnings for the many to emancipate themselves and become true farmers and free men.”
[Emphasis added] (Irsch, 1891, p. 10).

In linking Florida with the “true farmers and free men” and “chances for advancement by mere industry” traditionally associated with the West, state boosters arguably had a stronger case than their Southern counterparts who sported similar rhetoric. Of all the ex-Confederate states, Florida most resembled the expanse of so-called ‘virgin’ land long associated with the West. Although cotton was grown in the state’s northern counties, it never dominated Florida’s economy as it did elsewhere in the South (in part simply due to a lack of population); it is telling, for example, that Charles Nordhoff’s book, *The Cotton States* (1875), made no mention of Florida. (Tebeau, 1981, pp. 257-268; Nordhoff, 1876). Furthermore, the settlement of Florida after

Reconstruction involved a southward shift away from the state's cotton-belt counties and into the peninsula, which favoured an expansionist reading. The four 'Middle' Florida cotton-belt counties of Leon, Jefferson, Madison, and Gadsden, which, in 1840, had constituted 54% of the state population were, by 1880, home to just 23.1% of the total; by 1900, the figure had dropped to 12.5% – considerably less than the combined total of three more southern counties, Alachua, Hillsborough, and Marion, which had grown rapidly due to in-migration.⁴ The presence of a few hundred Native Americans in the Everglades only added to the mirage of the West forming in Florida's self-image. The *Florida Dispatch*, for example, recalling the harsher hymns of Manifest Destiny, promoted the incursion of white cattle-raisers into South Florida – “this rough and hardy class...the forerunners and pioneers of the frontier” – with the proclamation that “the hostile and blood-thirsty Seminoles, disputing every inch of territory,...making hideous the wilderness with the war-whoop, accompanied with all the attendant evils, have failed to check the fearless and onward march of these forerunners of civilisation.” (Anon., 1882b, p. 82). Unlike the bland uniformity of the Cotton Belt South, peninsular Florida, notwithstanding the lingering concerns about its “tropical” climate and swampy terrain (Stowe, 1873, pp. 37-38, 279-280), seemed to offer something ‘new’ and distinctive: in Grant's words, with “a peninsula extending out from a great continent like ours, affording unlimited demand for all the various tropical production it can supply, there is scarcely a limit to its resources”. (GCLC, 1885, pp. 16-17).

In an important sense, however, the promotional emphasis on individual “industry” creating prosperity from the ‘virgin’ soil, so intrinsic to the myth of the West, meshed poorly with peninsular Florida. This was because the very same urban-industrial

growth and consolidation which made the anti-modernist romance of the myth of West so appealing created a class of Americans wealthy enough to spend the winter, or at least a part of it, on leisure-filled holidays and tours. Thanks to its long coastline and mild winters, Florida was developing a reputation as a “great resort state”. (Proctor, 1950, p. 61). For affluent Northern tourists, Florida was promoted through its exotic nature and climate as America’s very own semi-tropical land, a healthful destination for seasonal tours. To an extent, the promotional calls for hard-working settlers, for “good men and true – men of intelligence, of mind, and of muscle, with willing hands to convert [Florida’s] vast forests into rich fields and fruitful groves, and to fill their own treasure chest with the well-earned reward of honest toil judiciously expended,” – reflected attempts to broaden the state’s appeal beyond that of a land of winter leisure. (Harcourt, 1889, pp. 16-17).

Although invalids and health-seekers had come to Florida before the Civil War, from the 1880s onwards tourism and hotel-building began to alter the state drastically, in both reality and imagination. One pamphlet estimated that, during the winter of 1885, “164,000 tourists [had] registered at the various Florida hotels,” – a figure almost half that of the resident population. (GCLC, 1885, p. 13). This discrepancy, between large numbers of visitors and few permanent settlers, contributed to the formation of, in one scholar’s words, Florida’s “primary stereotype” in American popular culture as “a place for rest and relaxation”. (Thompson, 2003, p. 1). The exemplars of this new ‘American Riviera’ were the lavish hotels, beginning with the opening of St. Augustine’s Ponce de Leon in 1888, which were built along Florida’s coastlines by railroad developers Henry Plant and Henry Flagler. (Bramson, 1998). Catering for those rich enough to spend the

winter season at leisure, these hotels “did much to create the now familiar image of Florida as a comfortable, pleasurable, even utopian destination” – yet such elite resorts did little for those promoters seeking to populate the state *en masse*. (Braden, 2002, p. 3).

Florida, in this sense, was emblematic of a wider Southern phenomenon. As Nina Silber has shown, Northern tourists heading south in the post-war years played an important part in the slow, piecemeal, process of sectional reconciliation, re-shaping how many – chiefly affluent – Northerners perceived the region. (1993, pp. 66-92). The transformation, however, had consequences which, for southern immigration promoters, were hardly beneficial. “No longer preoccupied with wartime anguish and destruction, northerners of the post-Reconstruction years increasingly thought of the South in tourist terms, as a land of leisure, relaxation, and romance.” (Silber, 1993, pp. 66-67). The South, as a “welcome retreat from northern modernity,” became somewhere visited to get away from work and business: a place divorced from labour – with the notable exception of African-Americans, who appeared to tourists, if at all, as “picturesque” field-hands, servants, or minstrels. (Silber, 1993, pp. 80-82; Lears, 1981). The poet turned travel writer Sidney Lanier thus wrote of Florida offering “an indefinite enlargement of many people’s pleasures and of many people’s existences as against that universal killing ague of modern life – the fever of the unrest of trade throbbing through the long chill of a seven-months’ winter”. (1876, pp. 12-13). Such descriptions, while praising Florida’s winter appeal, created a disconnect between the state and the testing, year-round, individual labour associated with the myth of the West. Furthermore, the seasonal nature of Northerners’ trips southward seemed to compound long-existing concerns about the South’s climate and its effect on whites: according to one Florida land company, “the

greatest barrier to-day, even among intelligent people who have travelled and spent the winter in Florida, is the prevailing idea that while Florida is the *most desirable place* to spend the *winter*, yet it is *supposed* to be hot, unpleasant and unhealthy in summer. This mere *prejudice*, not founded on *facts*, has done more to keep *capital, home-seekers*, and *emigration* out of Florida than all other causes combined.” [Emphasis in original] (GCLC, 1885, p. 15).

A potential solution to these problems, for southern promoters, was to recast their region within the popular imagination. The image of the South as predominantly a land of winter leisure was countered by the ‘New South’ ideas advocated by men such as Georgia’s Henry Grady and Maryland’s Richard Edmonds, for whom industrial development, agricultural diversification, and desirable immigration represented the region’s crucial selling points. (Gaston, 1970, pp. 45-79). This New South myth, however, was, in one sense, the rebellious off-spring of the Western myth. As Paul Gaston has shown, the New South “creed”, which posited that the “South’s opportunities were unmatched by those in any other part of the country,” frequently involved promoters “at pains to make invidious comparisons with the West,” which remained the favoured destination for migrants. (1970, pp. 73-78). Turning the climate issue on its head, for example, Grady asked rhetorically, “why remain to freeze, and starve, and struggle on the bleak prairies of the northwest when the garden spot of the world is waiting for people to take possession of it and enjoy?” (In Gaston, 1970, p. 76). Southern promoters optimistically saw their region rising just as the West was beginning to decline. “The West has heretofore been the great receptacle of refugees from the commercial storms of the East, as well as of the emigrant from abroad,” declared a writer in Florida’s *Semi-*

Tropical magazine. “But the West is now involved with the East, while it no longer offers the immense wild domain of cheap and fertile and unoccupied lands...of former times,” and “the South is now the inviting field.” (Anon., 1875, pp. 139-140).

Envisaging their state as a natural inheritor to the West’s role within America, many Florida promoters evoked the free labour ideals so intimately tied to that region, where, the myth posited, “class” was temporary, even nonexistent, and any settler could achieve independence through honest endeavour. Thus, Seth French, a former Union soldier who became State Commissioner of Immigration and a wealthy landowner, in an 1879 guide for settlers, advocated:

“We want immigrants of kindred races, that we may be a homogeneous people...We do not wish to be misunderstood on this point; we do not want immigrants for subordinate positions, but, on the contrary, invite them to locate, and become the owners of their homes in fee simple forever; we want them to become citizens, and have with us equal political privileges and responsibilities in all the obligations imposed upon citizens under a Republican government.” (1879, p. 20).

Floridian calls for a “homogeneous” people, however, rarely referred to the entire population of the region – a claim that would inevitably raise the spectre of race and miscegenation. The Commissioner’s words, like those of other Florida promoters, illustrate the racial exclusivity underpinning the booster vision of social mobility. At the time of writing, African-Americans, emancipated and politically active, constituted 47% of the state population. (Arsenault & Mormino, 1988, p. 172). Even after Redemption brought the end of Northern attempts to reconstruct the South, African-Americans in Florida actively pursued economic justice, land ownership, and political agency, only to face rampant repression – economic, political, and violent – from the state’s white population, including those elites who desired a cheap, tractable work force, in part to

attract Northern investment. (Ortiz, 2005). It is significant, then, that the promotional obsession with the myth of the west – and, in particular, the notion that, to achieve success, “*everything depends upon the man*” – obliquely served to reinforce racial beliefs which fostered this repression, culminating, by 1900, in near-total African-American disenfranchisement, and a rigid system of Jim Crow segregation. (Rabinowitz, pp. 112-113).

According to Florida promoters, as they asserted the myth of the West, a settler’s success was a matter of individual worth and ability, unlike in the teeming, industrialised North, where social conditions made upward mobility and improvement that much harder: “poor men [in the North], whose means are too limited to enable them to buy and stock a farm, where lands are dear and building improvements expensive,” stated a representative 1877 pamphlet, “...provided they have industry, energy, pluck, and perseverance, can vastly improve their condition, and the prospects of their families, by coming to Florida”. (Jacques, p. 3). Yet African-Americans struggling against those same conditions, and more, *in Florida*, were generally depicted as thriftless and lazy – a damning verdict in any case, but perhaps more so in a promotional vision which repeatedly stressed that Florida “holds forth her hand in hearty welcome...[to] the poor, honest man...who comes to her seeking a comfortable home, and is neither ashamed nor too lazy to work for it.” (Harcourt, 1889, p. 16). For white promoters, the state’s freedmen were precisely those “too lazy to work for it,” and yet were, also, paradoxically, considered ideally suited to brutish fieldwork. “While the African is as necessary in clearing away forests and in hard manual labour as the Irishman is at the North,” explained Oliver Crosby, a New Englander by birth, “now that he is free he has no idea

of working more than is barely necessary to keep him in pork and grits.” (1887, p. 21). Indeed, “With all the progress claimed for the coloured man, it will be ages before the negro as a rule is a thrifty, honest labourer”; incoming white settlers pursuing Florida’s ‘Western’ opportunities, therefore, need not fear competition from the African-American population since the “average southern darky” was “utterly shiftless and devoid of honour”. (1887, p. 125).

If Crosby’s description stated explicitly what was believed by most southern whites (and, indeed, Northerners living in the south), James Wood Davidson demonstrated perhaps the prevailing attitude of promoters seeking to assuage white concerns about the presence of large numbers of African-Americans in their midst. (Davidson, 1889). The “negroes of Florida,” Davidson explained, had been dangerously pliant tools of carpetbagger governments during Reconstruction, but, with ‘home rule’ restored, they could be accommodated as a carefully controlled labour force under a wise, white patriarchy: “During the period between 1865 and 1876 these slaves worked faithfully in the plantation of politics;” he wrote, “but at the latter date a second emancipation changed their status slightly, and since then they have been working somewhat more and voting rather less, and are doing vastly better in all important respects. So also is Florida prospering. The future fortunes of the negroes are largely in the hands of the controlling race, and they themselves will probably have little to do in shaping it; and doubtless the less they have to do with it the better.” (1889, pp. 113-114).

For Florida promoters, the subordination of African-Americans was quite compatible with the vision of a society of prosperous, independent land-owners, given the pervasive belief that African-Americans, as former slaves, lacked the requisite character

to succeed in a free labour environment. The state's racial complexities were thus contained by white boosters, to an extent, by allusions to a "western", meritocratic Florida which rewarded progressive settlers and punished the lazy. Lamenting the lack of productivity of "the present generation of free-born coloured ladies and gentlemen" who were "of a far different class from the faithful old slaves of yore," Helen Harcourt could also state that, for white settlers, "a comfortable competence" "is...here waiting for the self-chosen ones, who elect to take advantage of the gift so freely offered to those who have manhood enough to grasp it and make the best use of it". (1889, pp. 345, 17). The fundamental link was that African-Americans lacked the "manhood" and virtue "to make the best use" of the privileges of freedom and American citizenship; their impoverishment, therefore, was self-inflicted. In Florida's self-imagery, racial hierarchy and republican opportunity could, and would, flourish side-by-side. Thus, Harcourt proclaimed that "the code of morality...does not stand high among the majority of the coloured race," while promising to the "vast army [of whites in the North] who struggle on from day to day, overworked, underpaid, or not paid at all" that "every energetic man may make a reality for himself if he will but seize and hold Florida's royal bounty". (1889, pp. 358, 15).

On one level, the prominence of the myth of the West in Florida promotion reflected the state's peripheral southern-ness, as promoters, eager to claim exceptionality for their state, looked beyond the impoverished region. Unlike the rest of the South, which needed to be completely rebuilt, and more like an earlier West, they exclaimed, Florida was untouched, "dormant": "The American Continent now so great in influence, wealth and enterprise, remained for ages unknown to the world," explained one brochure;

“so Florida, destined to be one of the bright stars and most desirable portions of the United States, remained an unknown wilderness for ages.” (GCLC, 1885, p. 9). The myth of the West, in this context, reflected an attempt on the part of promoters to cleanse Florida of the South’s tarnished history – a phenomenon apparent throughout the New South but which, perhaps, was more plausible in the comparatively under-populated Florida, less shaped, as it had been, by antebellum slavery.⁵ Barbour made it a point to stress that, although “they are found everywhere [in the state] in greater or smaller numbers” and performed most of the manual and domestic work, “the negroes, who form so prominent an element in the other Southern States, are less numerous and less conspicuous in Florida than elsewhere”. (1882, p. 232).

Florida’s promotion by railroads, hotels, land companies, and agricultural associations, moreover, produced results unmatched by other southern states. It is, of course, hard to measure accurately the influence of different promotional efforts; we cannot directly link a settler’s move to Florida to a particular pamphlet or source. There is evidence, however, that Disston’s projects had a significant impact in raising public awareness of the state’s possibilities and bringing settlers south. A former Deputy Commissioner of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, five years after the start of Disston’s land reclamation in the peninsula, reported a “great...rush of settlers to the ‘land of perpetual June’ from the North during the last five years, actually doubling the assessable property, and nearly doubling the population of the State.” (Foss, 1886, p. 3). In rehabilitating the state’s credit, moreover, the Disston purchase acted as a catalyst for railroad development in the 1880s, including the expansive networks of Flagler. As the State Department of Agriculture recalled, in 1904, after Disston’s deal “Florida entered

upon an era of internal development which has made her one of the most prosperous in the South.” (McLin, p. 14).

In the twenty year period after 1880, Florida’s population saw a 96% increase: considerably more than any other ex-Confederate state, with the exception of Texas (91%), and exceeding even that most famous of western states and Florida’s feted rival in semi-tropical agriculture and winter tourism: California. (See *Historical Statistics*). This percentage increase, in part, reflected merely the scarcity of people in Florida to begin with; however, it was also the result of burgeoning railroad expansion which opened up the peninsula for settlement, tourism, and the shipping of semi-tropical products such as citrus and winter vegetables. Improved railroad transportation by the 1890s saw Florida’s orchards out-competing California’s in the Northeastern market, with Florida shipping roughly one million more boxes than growers in the Golden State. (Steinberg, 2002, p. 181). A harsh freeze in 1895 wiped out much of Florida’s citrus production, ushering in a period of dominance in the industry by California growers. (Steinberg, 2002, p. 181; Sackman, 2005). But the freeze also encouraged development companies like Flagler’s East Coast Railway to push further south, beyond a so-called “frost line”. By 1896 the line had reached Biscayne Bay and incorporated the new city of Miami, which would become a major source of Florida promotion in later decades (Bush, 1999). Flagler’s hotel and land companies sold Florida’s tourist and agricultural attractions on a financial and promotional scale which far exceeded Disston’s fledgling efforts, with the *Florida East Coast Homeseeker*, a magazine started in 1899, boosting South Florida with articles such as “The South Against the West: What the State of Florida Offers – Convincing Arguments as to Why You Should Locate on the East Coast.” (Anon., 1907, p. 323). As

two historians of the South have written, “By 1900 [Florida’s] development was phenomenal: it was in tune with the spirit of the age. But that made Florida southern only in geography.” (Hesseltine & Smiley, 1960, pp. 413-414).

Into the twentieth century, meanwhile, promoters involved in land development and drainage projects across Southern Florida sustained links between the myth of the West and Florida’s self-image. Walter Waldin, a successful truck farmer and fruit grower in the Everglades turned land promoter, thus wrote, in 1910, “To the city man, living on a salary, often in a dark or stuffy office, always an underling, working in a narrow groove, dependent on today’s wages for tomorrow’s food, the independent countryman’s life must appeal, for he is a free man, master of himself” – and nowhere was such independence and self-determination possible as in South Florida and the “great Everglade district”, which “will not only develop into a most beautiful and prosperous country, but will in short time prove itself *the* Eden of North America”. (1910, pp. 5, 139). Visions of South Florida as a new West similarly shaped the back-cover illustration of a pamphlet by the State Department of Agriculture and Bureau of Immigration. In a re-working of John Gast’s famous 1872 painting *American Progress, or Manifest Destiny*, which had celebrated the ‘civilising’ conquest and settlement of the West, the Florida version depicted Columbia now leading cars, trains and stagecoaches southward over the state’s peninsula, displacing Native Americans and wild animals who fled towards the dark, swampy edges of the image. (Florida Department of Agriculture, n.d.). The Seaboard Air Line Railway, in a 1925 pamphlet, declared Florida “America’s last great frontier”: “Its conquest invites the sons and daughters of those whose achievements in the land of the setting sun have made the nation great and powerful”. (1925, p. 1).

Such mythic imagery gave to the development of Florida an important “foundation narrative”: a facsimile of the national triumphalism and individual heroism (at least, if one was white) long associated with the West. Yet the state’s actual development in the post-Reconstruction decades stood, in many ways, in stark contrast to the egalitarian notions inspired by this Western myth. Florida became dependent for much of its wealth on winter tourism, an industry which fostered profound divisions of wealth, between affluent visitors and hotel owners, and local, largely unskilled, service workers. Agriculturists carved farms out of the peninsula often through the labour of African-Americans, who were denied the social mobility, and, by the 1890’s, the vote, espoused by the promotional ideals. (Tebeau, 1971, p. 268). A Northern journalist, touring the state in 1893, shed light on the nature of Florida’s growth when he described it as “a resting place for those who can afford to loaf at the busiest time in the year – the men who have ‘made their piles’”. (Ralph, 1893, pp. 495-6). This was a far cry from Grant’s view of “the best opening for young men of small means and great industry,” and from the “homogeneous” garden imagined by French, Irsch, and others.

Southward expansion into Florida’s ‘open’ peninsula represented, to those boosters, an opportunity to tell (and sell) a different story, one which chimed with celebrated, rather than abhorrent, aspects of American history. Evoking the mythology of the agrarian West, Florida land promoters attempted to escape not only the emergent perception of a “rich man’s playground”, but also the confines of their regional past. At the same time, it enabled them to avoid confronting many of the divisive consequences which development was having on the state. Instead, they offered to Northerners, anxious about the nature of an industrial America, a vision of settlement which, though moulded

by Southern race relations, linked Florida with the glorious imagery of American expansion. As one pamphlet promised, “should the reader happen in Tallahassee and some other points in Florida, he would be surprised at certain seasons of the year to see the trains of emigrant wagons from as far west as the Mississippi Valley, going to South Florida, with their families, stock and earthly possessions – ‘mule ahead and dog under the wagon’. It reminds one of the settlement of the West a generation ago.” (GCLC, 1885, p. 13).

Notes

1 Explicit references to Horace Greeley's address appeared in numerous Florida promotional publications, including one which explained, "The advice of Horace Greeley... was appropriate when uttered, but... now the order of things is changed. To-day there are large possibilities for young men, and older ones too, in Florida. The lands may be less productive than those in the west, but they respond cordially to kind treatment, and are cheaper": See Ashby, J. W., 1888, p. 6.

2 Disston's land purchase was attacked as monopolistic by populist elements within the state (a not unfair accusation), but nonetheless played a vital role in the development and selling of Florida. The Disston sale enabled the state's Internal Improvement Board to pay off long-standing debts to creditors who had previously held State lands in receivership. With the debt paid, the Board was able to grant lands to prospective railroads, ushering in a golden age for railroad-building in Florida, as Northern-owned companies constructed new lines into, and across, the peninsula, in exchange for vast tracts of land. In the 1880's, Florida's total railroad mileage almost quadrupled: See Tebeau, C., 1971: pp. 278-282.

3 For U.S. Census purposes, "urban places" were defined as those with a population of 2,500 or more. Urban growth, in terms of the total population of people living in cities, rose from 5.1% in 1790 to 15.3% in 1850, 28.2% in 1880, 39.7% in 1900, and 51.2% in 1920: See the chapter on "Urbanisation" in Hays, S. P., 1995, pp. 47-68.

4 Leon, Gadsden, and Jefferson, three of the four major cotton-belt counties, made up the top three counties in terms of population in Florida in 1840 and 1860. By 1880, Duval county in northeastern Florida, home to Jacksonville, had displaced Jefferson, while Columbia county, also in northern Florida, had displaced Gadsden. By 1900, however, the greater influx of settlers into the peninsula, although not yet moving in any great numbers to South Florida counties such as Dade, meant that Alachua and Hillsborough (home to Tampa) had joined Duval as the leading three counties in the state – a precursor to the population boom in southern Florida which occurred in the first three decades of the twentieth century: See Florida Department of Agriculture, 1936, pp. 10-11.

5 Of course Southerners also cultivated "a collection of romantic pictures of the Old South and a cult of the Lost Cause that fused in the Southerner's imagination to give him an uncommonly pleasing conception of his region's past". Yet New South leaders, in this period, had grown up "with the period of their region's greatest failure. Quite naturally, the perspective which this experience gave them sharpened their criticisms of the Old South and led them to look to the North in their search for those variables which accounted for Southern poverty in a land of plenty": See Gaston, 1970, pp. 6, 48.

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[Library Special Collections abbreviations: FSU – Florida State University, Tallahassee. UF – University of Florida, Gainesville. UWF – University of West Florida, Pensacola. FAU – Florida Atlantic University, Boca Raton. UFS – University of South Florida, Tampa. UNF – University of North Florida. UCF – University of Central Florida, Orlando.]

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