

Water in Paradise: California, Florida and Environmental Rivalry in the Gilded Age

Abstract:

Focusing on the writings of state and local promoters, this paper traces how water-based characteristics formed a fundamental differential in the rivalry between California and Florida for settlers and tourists in the Gilded Age. In crude terms California and Florida presented as environmental opposites: while the Pacific state – its southern part, especially – was associated with a scarcity of water, Florida, with its many rivers, lakes, springs, and swamps, appeared to host a troubling abundance of the stuff. An important element of truth underpinned these conceptions. But in their competition to sell their states as “paradises” for Americans, land and tourism boosters accentuated this environmental dichotomy and its potential developmental consequences. ‘Dry’ California was set against ‘watery’ Florida as promoters repeatedly attacked the other’s supposed environmental deficiencies. Ultimately, while both states succeeded in becoming leading tourist destinations, Southern California’s proponents seemed to hold the upper hand over their Florida counterparts in selling an American homeland. Their championing of irrigation as a ‘civilizing’ process that converted desert into prosperous garden soothed widespread anxieties over living in such an arid land and contrasted with the persistent struggles of Florida’s advocates to convince Americans to relocate permanently to the supposedly water-logged peninsula.

In the decades after the US Civil War, California and Florida were promoted as “twin” paradises in the American imagination.¹ While they fronted different oceans and reflected divergent regional pasts, the pair entered into a competitive relationship as their promoters pursued tourists, settlers, and investors. In this regard, California and Florida belonged to a nationwide phenomenon of Gilded Age boosterism, as northeastern capital supplied railroad expansion across the West and South and regional developers strove to entice Americans to distant farms and homesteads, cities, and resorts in order to make money and build up communities.² Yet California

¹ ‘Exile’, “Florida and California”, *Florida Dispatch*, 1:14 (June 26, 1882), 213.

² On Gilded Age boosterism, see David Wrobel, *Promised Lands: Promotion, Memory, and the Creation of the American West* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2011); Jocelyn Wills, *Boosters, Hustlers, and Speculators: Entrepreneurial Culture and the Rise of Minneapolis and St. Paul, 1849-1883* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2004); Charles Postel, *The Populist Vision* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 297; C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South, 1877-1913* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1977), 497.

and Florida also stood apart because of environmental and climatic factors. Both were perceived and promoted as distinctively “semi-tropical” domains due to their sunshine and warmth, coastlines, and ‘exotic’ landscapes.³ In the Golden and Sunshine states railroad, hotel, and land developers, immigration agents, and travel writers evoked images of fruitful gardens awaiting Americans inhabiting colder, more populous and industrialized parts of the United States. Whether for a health trip to remedy consumption or “nervousness,” to escape a frigid northern winter in luxuriant new hotels, or to settle an orange grove, numerous Americans were presented with a choice between a pair of states that, as one journalist commented, each claimed to be the nation’s “true semi-tropical paradise.”⁴ Environmental attractions thus connected the selling of Southern California and peninsular Florida through new industries that focused alternately on shipping in tourists and shipping out fruit. Yet their natural environments also critically distinguished the “twins”: most profoundly in relation to water, with California considered too arid and Florida too wet.

Historians of California and of Florida have long emphasized the importance of water and water management to each state.⁵ Whether in terms of irrigation (in California), drainage (in Florida), or urban expansion (such as the Owens Valley Aqueduct in Los Angeles), developers’ use of water resources formed a fundamental factor in the growth of both states.⁶ Water quality and environmental management

³ Henry Knight, *Tropic of Hopes: California, Florida, and the Selling of American Paradise* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2013), 1-16.

⁴ “Florida and California”, *Daily Alta California*, July 23, 1883, 2.

⁵ Donald Pisani, *From Family Farm to Agribusiness: The Irrigation Crusade in California and the West, 1850-1931* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984); Donald Worster, *Rivers of Empire: Water, Aridity and the Growth of the American West* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985); Nelson Blake, *Land into Water – Water into Land* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1980); Mark Derr, *Some Kind of Paradise: A Chronicle of Man and the Land in Florida* (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1989).

⁶ Norris Hundley, Jr., *The Great Thirst: Californians and Water: A History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), i-xvii; Michael Grunwald, *The Swamp: The Everglades, Florida, and the Politics of Paradise* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006).

remain issues of major current importance in both states, highlighted since the mid-twentieth century by the rise of the environmental movement and the massive population increases in California and Florida, both of which face intensifying concerns over their “fragile,” damaged, and even “disappearing” water resources.⁷ Water’s relevance to their rivalry in the Gilded Age, however, bears further scrutiny, not least because it set the stage for the two states’ modern relationships with water. Competing for America’s attention and dollars, California and Florida promoters made access to and control over water crucial to their states’ environmental rivalry, fostering a developmental trend that contributed to California becoming, in the words of historian Norris Hundley Jr., “the nation’s preeminent water seeker,” while on the East Coast, as Cynthia Barnett writes, Floridian developers “have managed to drain, ditch, and divert so much water that there is not enough left in the ground for fast-growing population centers.”⁸

Earlier architects of regional growth, late nineteenth century boosters in California and Florida focused on environmental and water characteristics in their interstate rivalry and placed man’s control over nature at the heart of their competing promotional visions. While scholars have highlighted the importance of California and Florida to one another in terms of their promotional and developmental identities in the Gilded Age, the environmental, water-related contrast between the pair needs to be explored further as a crucial element in their formation as American paradises.⁹ Historians of California and of Florida have separately emphasized the role of the railroads, accessible agricultural land, and leisure and climate tourism in the states’

⁷ Cynthia Barnett, *Mirage: Florida and the Vanishing Water of the Eastern United States* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007); Tom Swihart, *Florida’s Water: A Fragile Resource in a Vulnerable State* (New York: RFF Press, 2011); Marc Reisner, *Cadillac Desert: The American West and Its Disappearing Water* (London: Pimlico, 2001).

⁸ Hundley, *The Great Thirst*, xviii; Barnett, *Mirage*, 7.

⁹ See Knight, *Tropic of Hopes*, esp. 117-154; Stephen Whitfield, “Florida’s Fudged Identity”, *Florida Historical Quarterly*, 71 (April 1993), 7-29.

transformations in the late nineteenth century; but their self-imageries were also defined by an environmental rivalry in which conceptions of water and its effect on development assumed a major place.¹⁰

This is not to downplay the historical and regional factors that distinguished the pair: California being, of course, western and a ‘free’ state, whereas Florida, of the Confederate South, hosted legalized slavery up to 1865. The South’s postbellum social and economic troubles hurt Florida in ways that California, part of the celebrated west, escaped.¹¹ Reconstruction – with its biracial state governments, extralegal violence, and southern resentment of Yankee ‘carpetbaggers’ – dissuaded many northerners from settling in Florida, despite the state being under-populated for the region.¹² With ‘Redemption’ in 1876, white Democrats initiated efforts to sell northerners on a rising “New South” associated with industrial promise rather than King Cotton.¹³ Although Florida’s “New South” boosters relied less on industry than on a vision of prosperous small farms producing semi-tropical fruits, the state shared in the wider region’s expansion of railroad lines to become a more attractive destination for white Americans.¹⁴ Nonetheless, Florida struggled to shed the negative connotations of being a southern state. Regional as well as environmental factors help to explain why Florida’s population growth lagged behind Southern California’s, even

¹⁰ On California promotion, see Richard Orsi, *Sunset Limited: The Southern Pacific Railroad and the Development of the American West, 1850-1930* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 45-64, 105-168; Douglas Sackman, *Orange Empire: California and the Fruits of Eden* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 17-46; Lawrence Culver, *The Frontier of Leisure: Southern California and the Shaping of Modern America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 15-51; on Florida, see John Spivack, “Paradise Awaits: A Sampling and Brief Analysis of Late Nineteenth Century Promotional Pamphlets on Florida”, *Southern Studies*, 21 (Winter 1982), 109-31.

¹¹ Knight, *Tropic of Hopes*, 17-44.

¹² Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 307-315, 390-391, 425-443.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 587-601; Woodward, *Origins*, 107-141.

¹⁴ Sean Cashman, *America in the Gilded Age: From the Death of Lincoln to the Rise of Theodore Roosevelt* (New York: New York University Press, 1993), 234-236.

as the pair emerged as legitimate rivals through the Gilded Age: as one San Francisco newspaper observed in 1902, Florida represented “California’s only companion in the Union in the production of tropical and semi-tropical fruits, and also in the entertainment of winter tourists who flee from the climatic rigors of the North and East.”¹⁵

Focusing on the writings of boosters, this article highlights the significance of water and environmental wetness in the promotional rivalry of these two “companions” – rather than how the public responded directly to the booster literature. In this regard, I follow Roland Marchand’s approach to product advertising by using place promotion as a way to make “plausible inferences” about popular attitudes towards California, Florida, and their environments.¹⁶ While state boosters (similar to advertisers) could be guilty of exaggeration and distortion, they were also driven by a need to connect with their readers as much as possible in order to appeal to them.¹⁷ Moreover, many promoters had settled in these states themselves and thus had very real faith in their new homelands. Considering the recurrent themes and images produced by promoters can help us better understand how environment (and specific environmental characteristics) shaped popular identities of a region or a state. In the rising competition between California and Florida, water and their natural environments formed a fundamental differential and became a key battleground in the booster imagery.¹⁸

In crude terms California and Florida presented as environmental opposites: while the Pacific state – its southern part, especially – was associated with a scarcity

¹⁵ “Distinguished Visitors”, *San Francisco Call*, 13 Aug. 1902, 8.

¹⁶ Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920-1940* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), xvii-xix.

¹⁷ See Paul J. P. Sandul, *California Dreaming: Boosterism, Memory, and Rural Suburbs in the Golden State* (Morgantown: University of West Virginia Press, 2014).

¹⁸ California’s mountainous nature versus Florida’s flatness represented another contrasting feature, but one far less prominent in the environmental imagery.

of water, Florida, with its many rivers, lakes, springs, and swamps, appeared to host a troubling abundance of the stuff. An important element of truth underpinned these conceptions. California had large swathes of arid domain whereas Florida contained extensive “swamp and overflowed” lands. Yet, in their competition to attract Americans, boosters accentuated this environmental dichotomy and its potential developmental consequences. ‘Dry’ California was set against ‘watery’ Florida as promoters repeatedly attacked the other’s supposed environmental deficiencies.

Varied aims related to tourism and settlement, as well as intrastate rivalries, complicated the promotional discourses. Northern Californians sometimes joined in critiquing their state’s drier southern counties as largely uninhabitable desert, while aridity, useful in attracting health-seekers, had to be diminished when appealing to agriculturists.¹⁹ In Florida, boosters targeting tourists emphasized their state’s water-rich nature as core to its “paradise” appeal, but this arguably fuelled notions of the state as a wetland unfit for year-round residence.²⁰ In part, these tensions reflected different target groups: affluent winter tourists or health-seekers and agricultural settlers of varying economic backgrounds. Frequently, however, California and Florida boosters made appeals to both groups in the same pieces of literature, envisaging tourists as potential future settlers while hailing citrus growing as a form of “gentlemanly farming” befitting wealthier arrivals.²¹ Similarly, as Marc Reisner has shown, western land boosters often marketed the effects of their “climate on health” specifically to attract settlers and farmers.²² Touristic and settler-focused promotion thus became interlinked: in California and Florida, the repeated booster references to ‘paradise’ meant not only lands offering mild winters, health, and leisure

¹⁹ Pisani, *From Family Farm to Agribusiness*, 26-27

²⁰ *Florida East Coast Railway* (Buffalo: The Matthews-Northrup Co., 1898), np.

²¹ “California and Florida”, *Los Angeles Times*, May 19, 1891, 4.

²² Reisner, *Cadillac Desert*, 39.

for weary Americans, but also gardens that were “next to a paradise” for agriculturists, especially fruit-growers, rewarding outdoor labor and paving the way for prosperous, rural alternatives to industrial America.²³

Ultimately, however, Southern California’s proponents seemed to hold the upper hand over their Florida counterparts in selling an American homeland, with environmental conceptions an important part of this. Their use and championing of irrigation as a “civilizing agent” that converted California’s deserts into prosperous gardens worked to soothe widespread anxieties over living in such an arid land and contrasted with the persistent struggles of Florida’s advocates to convince Americans to relocate permanently to the supposedly water-logged peninsula.²⁴ Despite Florida being nearer to many Americans than California, quicker and usually cheaper to reach by transportation, and with generally less expensive lands, the southern state’s growth in population fell behind that of Southern California. Between 1870 and 1900, peninsular Florida’s population rose from 42,325 to 191,152 (an increase of 352 per cent) whereas Southern California’s population grew from 32,032 to 304,211 (a rise of 849 per cent).²⁵ Population growth in both places was, of course, multifactorial and shaped by thousands of individual circumstances; yet the booster literature reveals the prominence of water and environmental imagery in the minds of California and

²³ For references to “paradise”, see O. A. Myers, *Alachua Country: Her Attractive Features and Public Improvements* (Gainesville: Cannon and McCreary, 1892), 1; “California, The Farmer’s Paradise”, *New York Times*, Apr. 3, 1887, 6; see also Rev. R. W. C. Farnsworth, *A Southern California Paradise* (Pasadena: R. W. C. Farnsworth, 1883); Rev. T. W. Moore, *Treatise and Handbook of Orange Culture in Florida, Louisiana, and California* (New York: E. R. Pelton & Co., 1886), viii.

²⁴ T. W. Haskins, “Irrigation As A Civilizing Agent”, *Land of Sunshine*, 1:2 (July 1894), 40.

²⁵ Southern California is defined here, in conventional terms, as modern-day Imperial, Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, San Bernardino, San Diego, Santa Barbara, and Ventura counties; peninsular Florida is defined as the whole peninsula south from, and including, modern-day Citrus, Marion, Putnam and St. Johns counties. Population data collated from: *Historical Census populations of Counties and Incorporated Cities in California, 1850-2010* [http://www.dof.ca.gov/research/demographic/state_census_data_center/historical_census_1850-2010/view.php]; *The Fifth Census of the State of Florida Taken in the Year 1925* (Tallahassee: T. J. Appleyard, 1926), 16-17.

Florida's strongest advocates and detractors. Along with regional differences, environmental factors were fundamental to how Americans differentiated between California and Florida. The environmental dichotomy reflected a broad conceptual difference between California's 'controlled' waters (through irrigation pipes, for example) and Florida's 'wild' waters (associated with wetlands and swamps) that made the latter state appear the more daunting and undesirable one: "an impracticable wilderness."²⁶ Before we turn to this environmental rivalry, it is instructive to consider the respective water-based characteristics of each state and their relation to local promotion and development.

Water in Scarcity: California

In California, water has often come at a premium. For good reason, since excepting notable examples such as the rivers of the Sierra Nevada mountain range that cascade its northern region, and which held the ore that first attracted so many Americans to the territory in the 1840s and 1850s, the state is lacking in bodies of water. Only 4.8 per cent of California's area is water (the national average is 7 per cent) while aridity is particularly acute in Southern California, which has a very low rainfall.²⁷ Not unrelated to this, the region had a very small population through most of the nineteenth century. Following US acquisition of the scarcely settled Mexican territory in 1848, American migrants to California – typically, gold-seekers and entrepreneurs – primarily settled in northern California, especially in the Bay Area. The southern third of the state was frequently dismissed as the "cow counties" due to the cattle

²⁶ "Florida and the Centennial", *The Semi-Tropical*, 1:1 (September 1875), 63.

²⁷ Environmental data from <http://ga.water.usgs.gov/edu/wetstates.html>.

ranches that had been the main industry there in the Mexican era.²⁸ The dryness of the region created widespread doubts over its agricultural potential – certainly for any kind of farming “traditional” to Midwestern or East Coast Americans. California’s central and northern counties initially produced wheat in boom-and-bust cycles grown on large-scale, mechanized farms. But Southern California remained (for want of a better word) a backwater: home in 1870 to just over 5 per cent of the state population. One critic, echoing many detractors of the southland, painted the region a “barren, waterless, and treeless” landscape.²⁹

Southern California’s scarcity of water, ironically, became a vital feature in the selling of the region to American health-seekers and tourists. As Linda Nash writes, nineteenth-century “Euro-Americans evaluated new landscapes not only in terms of their resource potential or aesthetic qualities, but through the effect on health.”³⁰ With the transcontinental railroad in 1869 opening up travel to the West Coast, promoters increasingly cited dryness of climate among the region’s qualities, attracting invalids and consumptives to Los Angeles, Santa Barbara, and other ‘resort’ destinations.³¹ Climatic arguments filled the pages of hotel, real estate, and railroad tracts, as promoters targeted those Americans who sought therapeutic alternatives to the modern stresses and ailments of an urban-industrial nation.³² As developer of Venice, California, Abbot Kinney wrote, “Our electro-steam civilization has put a fresh strain upon constitutions...Cities, excitements, and sedentary occupations are

²⁸ Harry Ellington Brook, *Irrigation in Southern California* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles Printing Company, 1893), 16.

²⁹ “The Hawaiian Islands as a Health Resort”, *Paradise of the Pacific*, 1:7 (July 1888), 5.

³⁰ Linda Nash, “Finishing Nature: Harmonizing Bodies and Environments in Late-Nineteenth-Century California”, *Environmental History*, 8:1 (January 2003), 25.

³¹ John E. Baur, “Los Angeles County in the Health Rush, 1870-1900”, *California Historical Society Quarterly*, 31:1 (March 1952), 13-31.

³² On American anxieties associated with modern industrial society, see T. J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), xii.

enfeebling the weaker individuals.” Wealthy but weary Americans were thus “searching the world over for a satisfactory climate.”³³ Southern California, boosters asserted, offered just such a restorative climate in which aridity was a boon. Journalist Charles Nordhoff’s best-selling 1873 guidebook praised Southern California’s dry atmosphere as a life-enhancing force for the weak and neurasthenic. For invalids especially, “the climate of the southern part of the State invites to a free outdoor life at all seasons.”³⁴ Climatologist and promoter William McPherson similarly highlighted California’s dryness: “The best medicine for consumption is a dry, warm, equable climate,” he wrote, adding that “cold with moisture leads to pulmonary diseases; heat with moisture leads to malarial fevers.” Aridity thus set Southern California apart from other health resorts, overseas and domestic, including “the Riviera, Madeira, Minnesota, or Florida.”³⁵ With Southern California’s lack of “moisture” supporting visions of a paradise for health-seekers, the latter’s growing numbers, taking advantage of new, direct railroad links to Los Angeles, led to a boom in Southern California in hotel construction and real estate investment in the 1880s.³⁶

For the region’s land promoters, however, the emphasis on dryness was problematic. The very same environmental quality – lack of water – that enticed winter visitors disturbed potential farmers.³⁷ The arrival of the Southern Pacific

³³ Abbot Kinney in Farnsworth, *A Southern California Paradise*, 93

³⁴ Charles Nordhoff, *California for Health, Pleasure and Residence: A Book for Travellers and Settlers* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1873), 114-5.

³⁵ William McPherson in Benjamin Truman, *Semi-Tropical California: Its Climate, Healthfulness, Productiveness, and Scenery* (San Francisco: A. L. Bancroft & Company, 1874), 36-37.

³⁶ Glenn S. Dumke, *The Boom of the 1880s in Southern California* (Pasadena: Huntington Library, 1991).

³⁷ Richard J. Orsi, “Selling the Golden State: A Study of Boosterism in Nineteenth Century California”, (Unpublished PhD. Diss., Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1973), 5. **In this regard, California boosters faced similar challenges to their counterparts in the Great Plains, who struggled to attract Americans to a domain associated with the Great American Desert. Southern California’s success with irrigation, however, became a model for promoters**

railroad into Los Angeles (1876) marked a significant step in eroding concerns about the remoteness of the region. Yet Americans familiar with tree-covered lands and consistent rainfall needed to be convinced about a desert-like region where evidently, as one historian puts it, water “did not flow abundantly.”³⁸ Traveller impressions compounded this reputation: “The tourist by railroad, when passing through this section [the San Gabriel Valley], if it be in summer time, is firm in his conviction that much of it is little else than an arid waste,” one booster lamented.³⁹ Access to and control over water resources became a driving obsession of California land promoters who strove to attract permanent residents both out of profit motivations and the desire to build up a more stable society based on agriculture rather than mining and land speculation.⁴⁰ “Water is king in California,” Pasadena promoter E. T. Pierce observed in 1883, since settlement of much of the southland “depends almost entirely on that element.”⁴¹

Water’s preciousness made it a coveted commodity. As historian Donald Pisani has shown, California’s irrigated development involved tortuous legal battles and often resulted, by the early twentieth century, in corporate “agribusiness”-style ownership of lands rather than the family farms initially promoted and settled.⁴² Irrigation processes, moreover, were expensive and frequently drove up land prices, and still were far from the perfect environmental solutions envisaged by many boosters.⁴³ “There will undoubtedly be much damage done to orchards in such places as Redlands, Ontario, Pomona and many others through an insufficient water supply,”

elsewhere in the arid West: see William E. Smythe, “The Conquest of Arid America”, *Century*, 50:1 (May 1895), 94-95.

³⁸ Sandul, *California Dreaming*, 80.

³⁹ Farnsworth, *A Southern California Paradise*, 48.

⁴⁰ David Vaught, *Cultivating California: Growers, Specialty Crops, and Labor, 1875-1920* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1999), 10.

⁴¹ E. T. Pierce in Farnsworth, *A Southern California Paradise*, 54.

⁴² Pisani, *From Family Farm to Agribusiness*, 440-452.

⁴³ Hundley, Jr., *The Great Thirst*, 102-103.

Riverside grower George Dole wrote in 1899 during one of the region's intermittent droughts.⁴⁴

Yet irrigation's significance to Southern California's environmental imagery in the Gilded Age is hard to overstate. Irrigation contributed to a fast-transforming landscape: from limited acreage in 1870 to some 200,000 acres a decade later, California's irrigated lands rose to over 1 million acres by 1890 and, in the process, supported the emergence of an "orange empire" with its heartland in Southern California.⁴⁵ Irrigation and settlement growth were interrelated phenomena, as Southern California's population in the 1880s grew by 212 per cent (rising from 7.5 per cent to 16.6 per cent of the state's total). Founded on arid lands watered by aqueducts and artesian wells, citrus colonies such as Pasadena, Riverside, and Ontario, epitomized an on-going environmental conquest championed by promoters. For historian Paul J. P. Sandul, "agriburbs" like Ontario were conceived and sold as ideal homelands that married the suburban dream of a civilized middle-class locale offering the best qualities of city and country life *alongside* prosperous, independent agricultural production.⁴⁶ Control of water, boosters asserted, overturned dry California's natural limitations and allowed for the creation of settler paradises: fruitful and independent. "The original organizers of colonies in Southern California sought a bountiful water supply; and wherever success attended their efforts, thriving settlements have been the outcome," declared Rev. R. W. C. Farnsworth in 1883. By then, he wrote, in place "of a barren plain," the visitor "observes an earthly paradise

⁴⁴ Letter from George Dole to Sanford Dole, Apr. 11, 1899, Box 2, *George Dole Papers*, Huntington Library.

⁴⁵ Pisani, *From Family Farm to Agribusiness*, 44.

⁴⁶ Sandul, *California Dreaming*, 2.

of model homes embowered in groves of oranges, lemons, and all varieties of semi-tropical fruits...”⁴⁷

The promotional imagery emphasized the control and engineering of water having overcome the fundamental problem of aridity. Riverside represented the best-known example of this irrigated conversion. Founded in 1871 by a colony of Midwesterners in arid, inland Los Angeles County, Riverside grew slowly, reflecting the experimental nature of citrus growing and the staggered development of canal networks bringing water from local mountain rivers. Growing investment in irrigation and improved horticultural knowledge, however, supported the community’s expansion in under twenty years to 6,000 residents with 10,000 acres in orange groves.⁴⁸ Irrigated land prices rose steeply with Riverside depicted as an ideal option for the ‘gentlemanly’ occupation of citrus growing.⁴⁹ Engaging too the older environmental conceptions of Southern California as “dry and barren as a desert”, Riverside promoters in the 1880s stressed their control of water in creating a new homeland.⁵⁰ Images of irrigation flumes and ditches thus filled the booster literature:

Fig. 1: Photograph of Irrigation Flume, Riverside, California in *Riverside Illustrated* (1889):⁵¹

The Riverside Board of Trade explained how the colony’s developers had “constructed dams, flumes, and ditches to control and lead the waters of the Santa Ana river out upon the thirsty and apparently barren lands,” thereby providing the

⁴⁷ Farnsworth, *A Southern California Paradise*, 48.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 13.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 29.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 7.

⁵¹ Photograph in H. J. Rudisill, *Riverside Illustrated: A City Among the Orange Groves* (San Francisco: H. S. Crocker & Co., 1889), 18.

lifeblood for a town that appeared an idyllic homeland set amid citrus groves and the San Bernardino Mountains:

Fig. 2: Photograph of City of Riverside, California in *Riverside Illustrated* (1889).⁵²

By the turn of the century Riverside, with a population of 11,000, had spread to 20,000 acres of oranges and the citrus town was said to epitomize Southern California's "triumph of irrigation."⁵³ Thus irrigation advocate William Ellsworth Smythe cited Riverside, specifically, and Southern California, generally, as the examples to follow for future federal irrigation of the West. In Riverside, Smythe wrote, the fruit farms were on small but prosperous plots, the "homes... a long succession of beautiful country villas, surrounded by lawns, trees, and glowing flower-beds," and the "civic institutions... fully equal to the highest New England standard." Through the man-made control of water, desert dryness had been vanquished and a civilization on a par with New England had been formed. Without equal, Southern California presented "an extreme illustration of the value of water in an arid country."⁵⁴

Water in Excess: Florida

For champions of Florida, water presented a starkly contrasting issue to that in California: one not of scarcity but excess. In terms of percentage of surface area that is water, Florida ranks seventh among the states, well above the national average at

⁵² Ibid, 8.

⁵³ William Ellsworth Smythe, "The Triumph of Irrigation" in T. G. Daniells (ed.), *California – Its Products, Resources, Industries and Attractions* (Sacramento: California Louisiana Purchase Exposition Committee, 1904), 22.

⁵⁴ Smythe, "The Conquest of Arid America", 94-95.

18.5 per cent.⁵⁵ The significance of water to Florida's reputation in the Gilded Age, however, went beyond geographical realities. Settlement in Florida before the Civil War hugged the plantation belt along the border with Georgia, such that peninsular Florida was often described as a *terra incognita* in the 1870s.⁵⁶ Yet one celebrated point-of-reference for Americans who knew little else about the state was that it had first been discovered by Europeans in the early sixteenth century through Spanish conquistador Ponce de Leon's search there for a "fountain of youth": a body of fresh water that, according to legend, would reinvigorate a person's body and soul.⁵⁷ Following the guidance of doctors, climatologists, and travel writers such as Harriet Beecher Stowe, who advised temporary relocation to a warmer climate, affluent northern invalids re-enacted this pursuit of restored health by travelling to northeast Florida and frequenting watering holes like Green Cove Spring in growing numbers.⁵⁸ If the medical benefits were probably illusory, Florida's mild climate (like Southern California's) convinced many visitors of its value as an escape from the frigid north. More active tourists headed up the St. Johns River in north-central Florida and in the 1880s, another body of water, the Indian River, became a leading destination for tourists venturing into the peninsula between December and April.⁵⁹

⁵⁵ Florida is surpassed only by Michigan, Massachusetts, Hawaii, and Maryland (plus tiny Delaware and Rhode Island): environmental data from <http://ga.water.usgs.gov/edu/wetstates.html>.

⁵⁶ J. S. Adams, *Florida: Its Climate, Soil and Productions* (New York: Fisher & Field, 1870), 57.

⁵⁷ References to the 'fountain of youth' abound in Florida's promotion: see Dr. Daniel G. Brinton, *A Guide-Book of Florida and the South, for Tourists, Invalids, and Emigrants* (Philadelphia: Geo. Macle, 1869), 32; "Climatic Influences", *Florida Semi-Tropical News* (Ocala), 1:1 (January 1889), 2.

⁵⁸ Charles J. Kenworthy, M.D., *Climatology of Florida* (Savannah: Morning News Steam Printing House, 1880), 4, 74-75; Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Palmetto Leaves* (Boston: James R. Osgood & Co., 1873); "California Vs. Florida", *Daily Evening Bulletin* (San Francisco), February 21, 1871, 1.

⁵⁹ See "Matters in Florida", *Atlanta Constitution*, February 8, 1870, 1; *Florida, the East Coast and the Keys* (Jacksonville: Florida East Coast Railway Company, 1895) 3.

Somewhat paradoxically, Florida's watery environment served as both a promotional asset and weakness. With some 1,200 miles of navigable rivers and numerous springs, Florida's bodies of water were advertised pervasively as tourist lures. With the state lacking in railway tracks until Henry Flagler and Henry Plant built their hotel and railroad empires in the mid-1880s, rivers – in particular, the 310-mile-long St. Johns – served as Florida's natural highways and the arteries for an expansive tourist trade. By 1870 daily steamers ran on the St. Johns River from Jacksonville to Palatka while health-seekers also travelled to spots like Silver Springs near Ocala: in the words of one visitor, “a subterranean river bubbling up into a basin nearly 100 feet deep and an acre in extent.”⁶⁰ Tour operators began running glass-bottomed boats to enable visitors to see all the way to the bottom of the spring. From just three in 1879, the number of steamers plying the St. Johns rose to 54 only a few years later, while Silver Springs attracted an estimated 50,000 annual tourists.⁶¹ Visiting writers like Sidney Lanier and Lafcadio Hearn waxed lyrical about Florida's waterways, Hearn describing his experience as a kind of modern “River-worship”.⁶²

Florida's tourism boosters placed water excursions at the heart of their promotional imagery. More than just practical necessity – reflecting the region's reliance on river transportation – this played on the desires of Americans in the Gilded Age for an escape from industrial modernity into a semi-tropical wilderness.⁶³ The promotional emphasis on waterways remained strong even as new railroads

⁶⁰ Editorial Correspondence”, *Atlanta Constitution*, February 13, 1870, 1; “Silver Springs”, *Daily Evening Bulletin* (San Francisco), May 25, 1878.

⁶¹ “Philadelphian Turned Fruit-Grower”, *Florida Dispatch*, Vol. 1 No. 1 (March 27, 1882), 4; Edward King, *The Great South* (Hartford: American Publishing Co., 1875), 378.

⁶² Sidney Lanier, *Florida: Its Scenery, Climate and History* (Philadelphia: J. P. Lippincott & Co., 1876), 12. Lafcadio Hearn, *Floridian Reveries* (1884-85), reproduced in Maurice O'Sullivan & Jack C. Lane (eds.), *The Florida Reader: Visions of Paradise from 1530 to the Present* (Saratoga: Pineapple Press, Inc., 1991), 162-165.

⁶³ On tourists heading to the “tropical” South, see Catherine Cocks, *Tropical Whites: The Rise of the Tourist South in the Americas* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013).

penetrated the peninsula in the 1890s. A railroad pamphlet *Song of the Indian River Tropical Trunk Line* thus promised visitors “countless lakes and winding rivers, almost lost in depths of green: Fairest flowers entwine to crown her, Florida, the Southern Queen!”⁶⁴ More than poetry, the visual imagery of travel-guides and souvenir booklets cast Florida as an aquatic excursion site for adventurous tourists. Of the 20 Florida scenes depicted in *Illustrated Florida*, an 1882 book published in New York, more than half featured what could be described as ‘water-scenes,’ focused especially on the St. Johns and Ocklawaha rivers and Silver Springs:

Fig. 3: Florida River Scenes from *Illustrated Florida* (1882)⁶⁵

Typical to Florida tourism pamphlets, watery nature dominated the frame: steamships and rowboats appeared as interlopers in a nearly primeval land- or water- scape inhabited by spiked plants and alligators. Implicitly, such images, exemplified by one jungle-like sketch of the Ocklawaha at night, brought into question the extent to which this land could be carved into ‘civilized’ homes and farms – offering more permanent benefits than romantic vistas for seasonal guests. Notably, they were balanced by other pictures that showed off the incursions of settlement such as orange groves and Jacksonville streets. Nevertheless, such promotional materials implied that the prime attraction of Florida lay in its rivers and springs: symbols of a “strange” watery paradise unspoiled by excessive modern development.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ *Song of the Indian River Tropical Trunk Line* (Jacksonville, Tampa, and Key West System), Box 1, James Edmundson Ingraham Papers, University of Florida.

⁶⁵ *Illustrated Florida* (Buffalo: Dodge Art Publishing Co., 1882), np.

⁶⁶ George Barbour, *Florida for Tourists, Invalids and Settlers* (New York: D. Appleton & Company, 1882), 107.

Florida's wet nature, however, represented a major concern for its land promoters, for whom removal of water amounted to a developmental necessity in the Gilded Age.⁶⁷ Florida's overflowing environment appeared wild and uncontrollable in a way that set it apart from arid Southern California, where boosters consistently promoted the "scientific skill" of irrigation building in overcoming dryness and creating sustainable communities.⁶⁸ Equally problematic, Florida boosters recognized that the state's apparent abundance of water fostered unwelcome associations with the "torrid" tropics and miasmatic diseases.⁶⁹ One doctor in the *New York Medical Journal* attacked Florida on the grounds that its atmosphere was dangerously "loaded with moisture," while another wintering there in the 1870s declared, "From what I have observed, I should think Florida was nine-tenths water, and the other tenth swamp."⁷⁰ Such declarations tapped into a long-existing antipathy for wetlands and swamps in the American imagination as distinctly unhealthy environs.⁷¹ Perceived connections with tropical ailments like yellow fever and malaria – a disease initially blamed on bodies of stagnant water, before scientists at the turn of the century proved that mosquitoes were the cause – tainted Florida, exacerbated by outbreaks such as a spat of yellow fever cases in Jacksonville in 1888.⁷² Even Harriet Beecher Stowe – in many ways a champion of the state – warned in her 1873 guidebook, *Palmetto Leaves*, of the summer's brutal combination of sickly swamps and excessive heat.

⁶⁷ George E. Buker, "Review of Nelson Blake, 'Land into Water – Water into Land: A History of Water Management in Florida'", *Florida Historical Quarterly*, 59:4 (April 1981), 477.

⁶⁸ Fred L. Alles, "Irrigation in Southern California", *Land of Sunshine*, 1:1 (June 1894), 6.

⁶⁹ Stowe, *Palmetto Leaves*, 279.

⁷⁰ Dr. Talbot Jones, *New York Medical Journal*, in Kenworthy, M.D., *Climatology of Florida*, 4; Stowe, *Palmetto Leaves*, 117.

⁷¹ Ann Vileisis, *Discovering the Unknown Landscape: A History of America's Wetlands* (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 1997), 43; for another part of the US tainted by association with wetlands, see Roger A. Windsor, "Environmental Imagery of the West Prairie of East Central Illinois, 1820-1920", *Journal of Historical Geography*, 13 (1987), 375-397.

⁷² Gordon Patterson, *The Mosquito Wars: A History of Mosquito Control in Florida* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2004), 14.

Florida's destiny, Stowe concluded, was surely to be a winter destination for wealthy sojourners rather than a permanent home for white settlers.⁷³

Observing an annual spring exodus of tourists from their state, Florida land promoters sought to reconfigure American perceptions of their state. This involved reinterpreting the state's watery nature while highlighting the possibilities of regions not usually visited by tourists. Sumter County (due south of Ocala and west of Orlando) serves as a case in point. Settled shortly after the Civil War, Sumter became home to a small community of orange growers who saw promotion as the means of building up their region: "to see our rich unoccupied lands peopled with an industrious, virtuous, prosperous population," as John Richmond wrote in 1882. For Richmond, Florida's swelling tourist trade focused on the coastal and river towns obscured Sumter County's prospects, as most visitors to Florida "have seen and heard nothing of these great tracts of beautiful rolling country, scattered throughout the interior, fertile and salubrious beyond all they have imagined." His point was a different but valuable Florida existed further inland – more ideal for agricultural settlers – which the water-tourism not only overshadowed but *hurt* by persuading Americans that Florida, by its very nature, ought be visited in winter only. Turning the tables on those who feared such a landscape, Richmond converted the interior's watery domain into a selling point. Sumter County formed part of Florida's "lake region," but as the higher, watershed part of the peninsula, this amounted to a positive characteristic – providing both an aesthetic charm and routes to market. Furthermore, the lakes improved the atmosphere. Noting how many Americans yet believed that the peninsula had to be a "sickly burning furnace in summer," Richmond countered that the region possessed "two powerful mitigating natural agencies" that made this

⁷³ Stowe, *Palmetto Leaves*, 120-122.

untrue: ocean breezes and evaporation from the lakes. “These lakes *screen* us from the *heat*,” Richmond stated, with the town’s growing orange produce proof of a healthy agrarian community set for the future.⁷⁴

Others joined the Sumter County resident in evoking Florida’s water-filled nature as a benign quality for northern settlers. A Canadian-born land surveyor who migrated to Florida in the 1860s and published detailed treatises on Orange County in the 1880s, John A. Macdonald recast the state’s environmental imagery to present an American homeland for fruit-growers.⁷⁵ Echoing Richmond, he expressed concern about the impact health tourism to the St. Johns River region had upon broader conceptions of the state. In the tourist hot spots, visitors were surrounded by rivers and often a “damp, foggy climate,” which led to assumptions that the rest of the state had to be the same, if not worse. But while the peninsula had its fair share of low, unhealthy wetlands, Macdonald explained, it possessed also fertile and inexpensive lands particularly suited for semi-tropical fruits. The obsession with waterways and winter tourism, in effect, mistook Florida’s greater potential as a productive garden for those archetypal Americans – independent farmers – who could discover a virtuous alternative to wage labor in an industrial city. For settlers considering Florida, the St. Johns River and the popular springs were precisely the areas to avoid: for “health and successful colonization,” the high, lake-filled lands of interior Florida were the best choice, including his new home of Orange County. While MacDonald was obviously self-interested in promoting his adopted region, he represented part of a growing vanguard of settlers keen to overcome, in their eyes, outmoded prejudices

⁷⁴ John F. Richmond, *Sumter County, Florida: Its Situation, Climate, Soil, Productions, Transportation, Lines, Lakes, Rivers* (Philadelphia: McCalla & Stavelly, 1882), 6-9.

⁷⁵ This was a different man to the Canadian Prime Minister John A. Macdonald who led Canada into confederation.

against Florida's watery nature and thereby open up a semi-tropical garden for American farmers.⁷⁶

This promotional vision, however, came up against the claims of California promoters who were equally eager to win over American hearts and minds in the competition with their East Coast "twin".

Environmental Rivalry: California and Florida

Asked in 1887 to consider the relative prospects of California and Florida as orange-producing countries, U.S. government entomologist C. V. Riley told the *Chicago Times*: "Comparisons are odious."⁷⁷ Both question and answer undermined his pithy assertion, however. As the very existence of the *Chicago Times* article suggested, many Americans were considering and contrasting California and Florida as potential destinations, whether for winter tourism or agricultural settlement (and Riley himself, despite stated reservations, proceeded to compare the two states, finding largely in California's favor).⁷⁸ However "odious," such comparisons represented an increasingly commonplace feature for two states offering similarities in climatic attractions and agricultural opportunities. Indeed, shared goals fostered a growing dialogue between their promoters, much of it good-natured.⁷⁹ Californian Charles Shinn thus wrote to Florida boosters in 1882 expressing Californians' interest in the peninsular state "because of the similarity, in many respects, of the climate and productions of California and Florida," which was "especially true of the southern

⁷⁶ John A. Macdonald, *Plain Talk about Florida: For Homes and Investments* (Eustis, Fl.: MacDonald, 1883), 26-28, 56-67.

⁷⁷ C. V. Riley quoted in "California Vs. Florida Oranges", *Florida Dispatch*, 7:22 (May 30, 1887), 464.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ See, for example, "New Publications", *Florida Dispatch*, 1:2 (April 3, 1882), 4.

portion of this State.”⁸⁰ Boosters on both coasts recognized that they faced parallel, albeit inverted, challenges when it came to water: “So, by way of contrast,” as a Florida writer in the *Los Angeles Times* put it in 1885, “it will be easily perceived that Florida is as much too wet as California is too dry.”⁸¹ Such “friendly” communication notwithstanding, competition increasingly gave an edge to the relationship, as Americans, invalids or agriculturists (sometimes both), faced a dilemma between, as one migrant to Southern California described them, “the Twin Sisters of Uncle Sam.”⁸²

In the 1870s, as they looked with concern upon the rise of peninsular Florida after the Civil War into a health resort of growing renown, California promoters seized upon the water/environmental issue to critique their rival. Referring to invalids and tourists who opted for Florida, Benjamin Truman charged in 1874: “Florida and Cuba, and most of the Italian landscapes, are covered with a rank, rich growth of tropical vegetation, saturated always with moisture, and undergoing a constant and rapid decomposition.” Such damp environs meant decay and disease rather than recovery. By contrast, Southern California offered an arid atmosphere that strengthened the weak. “The purity of the air of Los Angeles is remarkable,” Truman declared. “Vegetation dries up before it dies, and hardly ever seems to decay.”⁸³ Californians repeatedly emphasized Florida’s wetness, suggesting an uncontrollable environment that, with its tropical combination of heat and moisture, amounted to a death trap for white Americans who stayed beyond the winter. According to Abbot Kinney, “The surplus of water, the lowness of the land, and the long, hot summer

⁸⁰ “California Fruit-Growing”, *Florida Dispatch*, 1:7 (May 8, 1882), 108.

⁸¹ ‘Itinerant’, “In the Semi-Tropics”, *Los Angeles Times*, Mar. 1, 1885, 2.

⁸² Exile, “Florida and California”, 213.

⁸³ Truman, *Semi-Tropical California*, 33-34.

make Florida subject to malaria and fevers.”⁸⁴ Racial anxieties that linked wet tropics with non-white races gave added power to these claims.⁸⁵ Dismissing Florida as too drenched, Kinney argued that “no part of the State is a favorable all-the-year climate for an Anglo Saxon constitution.”⁸⁶

Faced with these environmental-racial assertions, Floridians countered that wetness saved rather than doomed their state. Pointing out that Florida inhabited the same latitude as the Sahara Desert in Africa, one promotional writer posed the question: why was Florida not a barren desert too? His answer was simple: Florida was surrounded and intersected by water. “Why then think that Florida must be damp and unhealthy?” he charged. “Without this expanse of waters, Florida might be an arid desert like Sahara; with it, it is a perpetual garden.”⁸⁷ Water-rich nature made their state verdant and fruitful rather than unhealthy – and certainly no worse than California. “There is as much malaria on the Sacramento and the San Joaquin as on the St. Johns, if not more,” wrote Floridian settler S. Powers (not unfairly, since malaria existed in California’s valleys), before seizing on “the extreme aridity of California” that made watered lands there often prohibitively expensive.⁸⁸ Florida thus amounted to a better option for settlers of limited means. Other Floridians creatively critiqued Southern California’s aridity. In an 1888 piece comparing the two states, Rev. George Watson of Alachua County conceded that his state had plenty of watery “waste land” but countered that “Southern California would gladly give

⁸⁴ Kinney, in Farnsworth, *A Southern California Paradise*, 94.

⁸⁵ Nash, “Finishing Nature”, 28-29.

⁸⁶ Kinney, in Farnsworth, *A Southern California Paradise*, 94.

⁸⁷ Daniel Tyler, *Where to Go in Florida* (New York: W. M. Clarke, 1881), 22.

⁸⁸ S. Powers, “Florida and California”, *Florida Farmer and Fruit Grower*, 1:14 (April 6, 1887), 108.

millions of wealth for a few of the little lakes, tens of thousands of which begerm [sic.] the territory of Florida.”⁸⁹

Valid as that claim might have been, given Californians’ fierce pursuit of water sources, the retort came back from the West Coast with interest. “I must believe that our drier country and our lack of rank vegetation are advantages not possessed by Florida,” stated one health-seeker who settled in California.⁹⁰ For Californians, Florida’s wetness appeared less redeemable than their state’s aridity since it infiltrated the very atmosphere of the state. According to the *Daily Alta California*: “The predominating characteristic of the California climate is dryness, while that of Florida is dampness, not because the annual precipitation is so much greater as because from [sic.] the quantity of surface water, the evaporation greatly exceeds that in California.”⁹¹ The combination of “dampness” and heat hung like a shadow over Florida’s possibilities to host a progressive populace, raising doubts over man’s control over the natural environment. “There are some countries where heat and moisture are so great that vegetation grows so rapidly and in such rankness as almost to defy human effort to control or subject it,” Los Angeles resident Lionel Sheldon wrote, and thus there existed “a tendency to luxurious life which is obstructive to the growth of civilization.”⁹² While Sheldon avoided specific mention of Florida, countless others on the West Coast had no such qualms, dismissing Florida as a damp morass unfit for ‘civilized’ settlement. Because of its natural environment, in Florida

⁸⁹ Rev. George D. Watson, “Florida and Southern California Compared”, in John W. Ashby, *Alachua, the Garden County of Florida* (Gainesville: Alachua County Immigration Association, 1888), 7-10; see also “California vs. Florida – What a Visitor Says of Los Angeles”, *Los Angeles Times*, April 21, 1885, 2.

⁹⁰ Exile, “Florida and California”, 213.

⁹¹ “Florida and California”, *Daily Alta California*, Jul. 23, 1883, 2.

⁹² Lionel A. Sheldon, “Southern California: Conditions Conducive to Progress of Civilization”, *Californian*, 5:2 (January 1894), 208.

– Californian William Olden declared – the white American “cannot make a home, but only a temporary stopping place during the winter.”⁹³

Florida’s emergence as an elite tourist destination celebrated for its “luxurious” hotels and tropical nature potentially compounded these ideas of environmental determinism.⁹⁴ Tourism raised the southern state’s profile immensely, with one estimate of 164,000 visitors registered at Florida hotels in 1885.⁹⁵ Yet that figure represented nearly half the state’s total population at the time (338,406), suggesting a troubling outlook in which most Americans thought of Florida (if they thought of it at all) as somewhere that offered transient rather than permanent benefits. Recalling his experience on a Florida stream, northerner Daniel Tyler wrote in his guidebook, “Wild and undressed, nature is about you on every side.”⁹⁶ Such imagery troubled land promoters seeking to dispel the idea that Florida was primarily a watery wilderness.

The 1880s marked a period of heightened intensity in the California-Florida rivalry. New railroad links made both Southern California and peninsular Florida more accessible and raised the stakes in terms of the possible numbers of incoming tourists and settlers. Reclamation efforts also grew in scale to foretell thorough reformations of ‘dry’ California and ‘wet’ Florida. Isaac N. Hoag of the California Immigration Commission typified West Coast boosters in highlighting the control of water as a transformative process for his region: “Irrigating canals or ditches are already to be seen carrying water...in every direction through the valleys,” Hoag

⁹³ William Olden in *Semi-Tropic California*, Vol. 3 No. 7 (July 1880).

⁹⁴ On the rise of Florida’s leisure hotels, see Susan R. Braden, *The Architecture of Leisure: The Florida Resort Hotels of Henry Flagler and Henry Plant* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2002).

⁹⁵ *The Gulf Coast of Florida* (Chicago: Gulf Coast Land Company, 1885), 13.

⁹⁶ Tyler, *Where to Go in Florida*, 29.

wrote, and “the once apparently worthless desert is made to bloom and blossom like the rose.”⁹⁷

In Florida, Philadelphia financier Hamilton Disston in 1881 initiated a massive plan to control and settle Florida’s wetlands through drainage. In addition to purchasing four million acres of state land for \$1 million, Disston pledged to reclaim lands overrun by Kissimmee River and Lake Okeechobee waters by constructing canals to lower the water table.⁹⁸ With dredging underway, Disston formed the Florida Land and Improvement Company and hired an experienced California booster, William H. Martin, as Land Commissioner, who promoted Florida’s citrus industry by directly comparing it with California’s.⁹⁹ Although the Disston scheme ultimately reclaimed less than 100,000 acres before it succumbed to the nationwide depression in the 1890s, it had notable achievements in Florida’s development. Financially, it freed up an indebted state government that had previously been unable to grant lands to railroads (and thereby initiated a period of railroad expansion in the state); population-wise, it attracted several thousands of settlers to interior Florida counties like Orange and Polk.¹⁰⁰ Farther south, Kissimmee City grew from a frontier outpost to a town of 1,500 people by 1887, while the founding of new towns such as

⁹⁷ I. N. Hoag, *California, The Cornucopia of the World* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1883), 25.

⁹⁸ Matthew C. Godfrey & Theodore Catton, *River of Interests: Water Management in South Florida and the Everglades, 1948-2000* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2011), 4-5.

⁹⁹ William H. Martin in *Florida, Its Climate, Soil and Productions* (New York: Florida Land and Improvement Company, 1881), 32.

¹⁰⁰ Godfrey & Catton, *River of Interests*, 5; Christopher F. Meindl, “On the Eve of Destruction: People and Florida’s Everglades from the late 1800s to 1908”, *Tequesta*, No. 63 (2003), 5-36; James W. Davidson, *The Florida of To-Day* (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1889), 68; *Florida, Its Climate, Soil, and Productions*, 2; *Fifth Census of the State of Florida*, 16-17.

the aptly named Lakeland raised public awareness of the future possibilities of South Florida.¹⁰¹

Yet the Disston scheme also demonstrated the difficulties of draining large parts of Florida for settlement, with the scale and cost of reclamation prohibitive and still no guarantee of environmental conquest.¹⁰² Moreover, with their region undergoing a land boom in the 1880s, Southern Californians sounded unperturbed by Florida's prospects. In 1887 the *Riverside Press* (Cal.) quoted the *New York Sun*: "As a citrus fruit country, Florida is officially and practically taking a back seat. As a winter resort, Florida is to-day playing second fiddle to California. As a place of summer residence the State was always a failure."¹⁰³ Floridians countered that California was guilty of giving well-intentioned promoters a bad name. The California press, the *Florida Dispatch* complained in 1887, offered only a "booming lens" on the Pacific State and its prospects alongside the "most malicious misrepresentations and glaring falsehoods" about Florida's.¹⁰⁴ Despite this unfairness, Florida boosters, it was advised, should disseminate truthful pieces rather than "fight the devil with fire."¹⁰⁵

Yet they did return the "fire," ironically using water to fan the flames. The *Dispatch* cited an unnamed Californian, and former resident of Florida, for whom a stark ecological contrast differentiated the pair: "In Florida, a beautiful majestic river, many lakes, lovely and fragrant flowers, and birds of bright plumage and sweet song; here [in California], a land barren of vegetation, and fairly parched for want of water."

¹⁰¹ Oliver Martin Crosby, *Florida Facts Both Bright and Blue* (New York: South Publishing Co., 1887), 96-97.

¹⁰² Frederick T. Davis, "The Disston Land Purchase", *Florida Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 17 No. 3 (January 1939), 201-211

¹⁰³ *Riverside Press* article reproduced in "California", *Florida Dispatch*, 7:36 (September 5, 1887), 747.

¹⁰⁴ "California", *Florida Dispatch*, 7:22 (May 30, 1887), 464.

¹⁰⁵ "What California is Doing", *Florida Farmer and Fruit Grower*, 1:8 (February 23, 1887), 60.

The critic sustained his attack on “parched” California: “It never rains in this God-forsaken land more than two or three days in the year.” Reflecting the frustration of Floridians at California’s repeated attacks on their state’s excess of wild water, he finished with a thoroughly exaggerated picture of California as a land where, due to the “lack of water”, there were “no birds, only lizards and rattle snakes...[and] neither trees nor flowers are to be seen, nor anything green.” It all made him long “for a Florida summer.”¹⁰⁶

How much impact did these environmental representations have on shifting attitudes about California and Florida? It is hard to gauge their direct effects in any quantifiable sense, yet their prevalence in the promotional literature – written generally by migrants who had relocated to these locales – shows the importance of discourses that connected natural environment to issues of settlement and development in states like California and Florida. Such environmental imagery, closely related to conceptions of water and how controlled or wild it was, infused the rivalry between California and Florida – and likely gave Southern California an important edge. While myriad factors undoubtedly shaped their settlement patterns, state promotion and environmental imagery contributed to Southern California and Florida’s self-identities and reputations across America in a period when the West Coast state’s population growth exceeded Florida’s significantly – despite both regions producing quality oranges for the U.S. market and Florida lands generally being cheaper to buy. In the depressed 1890s, for example, peninsular Florida’s population grew by 34.1 per cent whereas Southern California’s rose by 51.1 per cent. Perhaps dryness trumped dampness in the American imagination. Compared to the promotion of irrigated Southern California that narrated a controlled conquest of

¹⁰⁶ “California Vs. Florida”, *Florida Dispatch*, 7:22 (May 30, 1887), 465.

regional aridity, Florida boosters struggled to overcome, both in reality and imagery, their own state's wetness as an impediment to growth. Thus the *Los Angeles Times* could declare in 1895 that Florida's warm, wet nature made for summers of "moist, depressing heat, accompanied by swarms of insect pests," that ultimately drove out from Florida "everybody...who can get away" and meant that state could never quite match its Pacific Coast rival.¹⁰⁷

Conclusion

The California-Florida competition provides a telling case study for the significance of environment, environmental conceptions, and promotional imagery in shaping regional identity and development in the Gilded Age. In both California and Florida, environmental attractions helped to fuel winter tourism industries that became a core driver of growth and investment. Their contrasting water-based characteristics, however, created distinctive challenges in regard to settlement that shaped their promotional rivalry. For West Coast boosters, Southern California's dry climate underwrote its appeal as a health resort; but the rapid expansion of irrigation enabled them to depict also a controlled solution to aridity that opened up the region's semi-tropical potential for settlers too. In Florida, tourism promoters presented an exotic watery domain to successfully lure affluent visitors and invalids: by the mid-1890s, tourism brought into the state an estimated \$8 million annually. Yet this potentially compounded a problem for the Everglade State throughout the Gilded Age: the "impression," as one promoter lamented, of a "low, damp country, mostly covered with water" – with the spectre of soaked air and sickly heat – that dissuaded countless

¹⁰⁷ "Florida and Southern California", *Los Angeles Times*, Jan. 2, 1895, 6.

Americans from buying permanently into Florida's future.¹⁰⁸ "It is the natural assumption of those who are not fully informed on the subject that a new country abounding in lakes, lagoons, and other bodies of water overflowing their channels, or without apparent channels, must breed of malaria," Florida promoter Col. A. K. McClure lamented in 1884.¹⁰⁹ At the heart of these fears was the image of an "overflowing" Florida, an environment of wild waters that resisted human control and raised doubts about its suitability as a homeland – an assumption California's developers were only too happy to reinforce.¹¹⁰

These "natural assumptions" had longevity, like the rivalry between the states. In the early decades of the twentieth century, promoters of Everglades drainage in South Florida frequently drew comparisons with irrigated Southern California to narrate how their control of water (by removing it) would open up new lands for settlement.¹¹¹ The failures of Everglades drainage, however, only reminded many Americans of the severe environmental challenges South Florida confronted, as the *Los Angeles Times* put it, in trying "to claim its marshes for civilization."¹¹² In the 1920s, with coastal South Florida beginning a real estate boom that would outdo Southern California's of the 1880s, the *New York Times* reported: "Florida cannot abide California, nor can it forget the State it most closely resembles in interests and spirit." Indeed, "the comparison is constantly drawn." But another important legacy of

¹⁰⁸ "Climatic Influences", *Florida Semi-Tropical News* (Ocala), 1:1 (January 1889), 2.

¹⁰⁹ Col. A. K. McClure quoted in *Lake County, Florida: Information for the Settler and Tourist* (Leesburg: Lake County Immigration Association, 1884), 11-12.

¹¹⁰ *To the Pacific Coast via the Sunset Route of the Southern Pacific Company* (New York: New York General Agency, 1885), 3.

¹¹¹ William Jennings in "The Story of the Everglades", *Florida East Coast Homeseeker*, 12:4 (April 1910), 122-123.

¹¹² "Everglades to be Reclaimed", *Los Angeles Times*, Aug. 28, 1927, 6; Christopher F. Meindl, "Past Perceptions of the Great American Wetland: Florida's Everglades during the Early Twentieth Century", *Environmental History*, 5:3 (Jul. 2000), 378-395.

the Gilded Age lived on: “The rest of the nation,” the *Times* explained, “knows Florida as a winter resort first of all.”¹¹³

The legacies of California and Florida’s environmental rivalry in the Gilded Age remain salient today. Water is central to daunting environmental questions related to population growth and economic development in both California and Florida. State promoters have arguably been too successful in drawing Americans to these Sunbelt ‘paradises’: in 1945, a Gallup poll found that California and Florida ranked first and second, respectively, as the states Americans wanted to live in.¹¹⁴ With massive influxes of residents in the second half of the twentieth century, California and Florida developers have placed increasing, even unsustainable, pressure on the natural water sources that supply now the first and third largest state populations. These current problems hark back to the states’ environmental imagery in the late nineteenth century, when their promoters emphasized man-made control of water resources to recast and sell Southern California and Florida. But while the two states shared an obsession with water, they were regarded as environmental opposites in being too arid or too damp. Southern California boosters championed through irrigation their control over water to a degree that their Florida rivals – faced with perceptions of ‘wild’ waters spilling over from rivers, wetlands, and swamps – could not yet match. There was something both apt and damning in the calculated description put forth in 1896 by one California editor, for whom Florida was simply “the tropic swamp resort”: an exotic tourist destination but not an American

¹¹³ “Florida – Paradise of Bootleggers, Realty Agents and the Poor Man”, *New York Times*, Dec. 31, 1922, 82; see also, “Wonderland”, *New York Times*, Mar. 9, 1947, 20.

¹¹⁴ “California, Florida Rated High in Poll on Good Places to Live”, *Washington Post*, Jan. 20, 1945, 7.

homeland. “That state,” the editor concluded, “seems...to have fully kept up the average of the world in being three-fourths water and one-fourth land.”¹¹⁵

¹¹⁵ “Florida”, *Sacramento Daily Union*, February 18, 1896. 2.