
12-1-1984

***The Photographs of Alvan S. Harper, Tallahassee, 1885-1910. Ed.
Joan Perry Morris and Lee H. Warner***

*Michael Thomason
University of South Alabama*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/tampabayhistory>

Recommended Citation

Thomason, Michael (1984) "*The Photographs of Alvan S. Harper, Tallahassee, 1885-1910. Ed. Joan Perry Morris and Lee H. Warner,*" *Tampa Bay History: Vol. 6 : Iss. 2 , Article 8.*
Available at: <https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/tampabayhistory/vol6/iss2/8>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Open Access Journals at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Tampa Bay History by an authorized editor of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact scholarcommons@usf.edu.

BOOK REVIEWS

The Photographs of Alvan S. Harper, Tallahassee, 1885-1910. Ed. Joan Perry Morris and Lee H. Warner. Tallahassee. 1983. Florida State University Press. Photographs. Pp. xii, 140. Cloth. \$30.00.

When Alvan Harper came to Tallahassee, perhaps with the encouragement of Judge J.T. Bernard whom he had met in his native Philadelphia, it was not much of a town. It was even less of a state capital. Off the beaten track, selected as the seat of state government in a compromise between rivals Pensacola and St. Augustine, it dozed in the piney woods of North Florida. Tallahassee must have seemed incredibly small and sleepy to Harper and his wife after the hustle and bustle of Philadelphia where he had operated a successful studio. Whatever his motivation for coming South, or his initial reaction to his new home, Harper began photographing almost at once and continued to do so until shortly before his death in 1911. As the text of this volume makes clear most of Harper's work has been lost in the all too usual, but nonetheless heartbreaking, ways photographic collections have disappeared all over the country. We are left to judge Harper based on a tiny fraction of his work which did just happen to survive. There is no way of knowing if the 1600 negatives from which this book was made are representative of the large and now forever lost whole, but they are quite good. Harper was a good journeyman photographer who saw to it that the job was done properly. If we are astonished by the quality of his work presented in *The Photographs of Alvan S. Harper, Tallahassee, 1885-1910*, it may be because we underestimate the accomplishments of local photographers throughout America in this period. Many were outstandingly good and Harper may have been, too, but without more of his work we must reserve judgment on that point.

Harper's photographs are presented in this reasonably priced and handsome volume both as documents of the history of Tallahassee and as fascinating images in their own right. After an introductory essay outlining Harper's life and work by Joan Perry Morris a selection of 101 photographs is reproduced, one image per page. The reproduction and selection are excellent, but the captions are maddeningly grouped together earlier in the volume. One must constantly turn back to that section to see what if anything is known about the picture. After a few pages the average reader will give that up and just leaf through the pictures. The illustrations are grouped according to subject beginning with portraits and ending with a variety of scenic views. Following the photographs comes an essay on Tallahassee's history by Lee Warner. Warner's essay is probably the best part of the book. If most people will buy this volume for its photographs, they will value it for Warner's essay which relates the views presented to the state capital's peculiar history. He skillfully weaves the photographs into Tallahassee's story, but once again the thoughtful reader must leaf back and forth between cited plates and text. As the photographs and text have no common organization one must jump all over the illustrations (say from plates 3 to 83) to follow the text. Many readers may not bother. This is a real shame because the text really makes the pictures come alive as historical documents.

The Photographs of Alvan S. Harper, Tallahassee, 1885-1910 is a beautifully printed volume which would have benefited from better coordination of its several parts. As it stands, it is a fine

coffee table book which might also have been an excellent visual history of Florida's capital around the turn of the century.

Michael Thomason

The Other Side of the River: Historical Cape Coral. By Betsy Zeiss. Privately published. 1983. Photographs. Bibliography. Index. Pp. vii, 215. Cloth.

The Other Side of the River: Historical Cape Coral is an interesting, albeit rambling, account of the life of the early settlers on the north side of the Caloosahatchee River. Two-thirds of the book is devoted to a look at the development of the broad area reaching from Pine Island Sound to Alva and other upriver settlements. The last eight chapters sketch the history of Cape Coral. The time span covered by the book is from the late 1800s to the 1980s.

A lack of background material and definite geographical information gives rise to difficulties in getting an overview of the area and in locating homesteads, ranches, schools, etc. of earlier periods on today's maps. The range covered in the book is so widespread that some of the information does not seem to be relevant to the history of Cape Coral.

The principal source material used was the reminiscences of the early settlers and their descendants. These are invaluable in the preservation of local history, and they provide an aura of authenticity and a dash of color to the book. However, they need to be reinforced, amplified and coordinated with events from historical sources. The reader would have received a clearer understanding of the area's history if the author had followed a more orderly, chronological account of events and growth.

Chapters fifteen through twenty-three give a delightful glimpse of how Cape Coral began, its early struggles, and its growing pains as it became a city. The author touches lightly but accurately on how drastically the land was changed as development began: "Early days at Cape Coral found a plethora of wildlife and a paucity of people. Those who were there manned draglines and dredges, land movers and graders, and they leveled the earth's silhouette of picturesque pines and stubby palms against a bleak, wintry sky to a skinned, barren, and truly desolate scene. They created canals where none had been....They disturbed rabbit warrens and fox dens and rattlesnakes living in the dense growth and ditches bordering Harney Point Road." (pp. 150-151) However, the author does not deal with many of the serious problems and legal questions involving sales promotions and law suits.

The book closes with an upbeat look at the continuing growth of the city and gives a veiled promise of a rosy future.

Alberta C. Rawchuck

Cotton Fields and Skyscrapers: Southern City and Region, 1607-1980. By David R. Goldfield. Baton Rouge. 1982. Louisiana State University Press. Illustrations. Photographs. Maps. Bibliography. Index. Pp. xiv, 232. Cloth. \$20.00.