A Brief Outline of the Agricultural History of Hillsborough County: 1880-1940

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In the 1880s, the familiar promotional brochures always noted the tremendous profits to be made from the growing of citrus crops. This was as true of Hillsborough County as any other Florida county. If the Antebellum can be called the era of King Cotton, so might the 1880s be called, in Florida, the era of King Orange. Few chances were lost to extol the virtues of the mighty orange tree and related crops. Although Hillsborough has not been recognized as one of the leading citrus areas in the 1880s, it ranked fifth in the state in the value of "orchard products" in the 1880 census, following only Putnam, Marion, Orange and Volusia Counties. Yet, ranking this high in the census figures did not mean that many people made their livelihood from citrus farming. In fact, the value of the "orchard products" was probably less than that for the sweet potato crop for the same period.

In their Descriptive Pamphlet of Hillsborough County, the Hillsborough County Real Estate Agency of Tampa, headed by John T Lesley, president, state flatly that the orange was the "most prominent, important and widely cultivated of all the fruits that are properly and easily produced in this county." While listing and briefly discussing the mango, guava, fig, pineapple, coffee and "alligator pear" crops, the majority of its rhetoric was spent upon the orange. Little worry, the pamphlet stated, about overproduction of the orange, if the crop only brought a penny an orange, a steady profit could be realized. The reasoning is seen clearly in the following:

On account of the immense number engaged in this industry, it is sometimes asked by unthinking men if the market will not be overstocked when all these groves come into bearing, and as a necessary sequence the profits become a "minus quantity." The question on its face is absurd, ... a thinking mind will reason, the demand creates a market, the supply controls the price. Where the supply is small the price is high and the demand is limited. Where the supply is great the price becomes low and the demand more general. To bring all the groves in Florida now into bearing simply means to open a larger market for oranges, and to place within the reach of those too poor to buy now this delicious fruit of the South. The prices of oranges may go down, and of a right ought to when the crop is increased, but if a man can get a cent apiece for his crop he can coin money out of a bearing grove. Moreover, further than this practical way of looking at this question, it is estimated that of the consumption of oranges in the United States only one-twelfth is furnished by Florida, the remaining
eleven-twelfth being received from abroad.²

An economist might fault the logic of this by noting that taste and the availability of alternative products also influence demand, however, the optimism of time for the production and sale of oranges and other citrus crops is clearly evident from the above. This same sense of optimism permeated the entire state in the period prior to the "Great Freeze" of 1894-95.

Local pioneers of Hillsborough, throughout the period, seemed to always have the obligatory orange grove or trees on their settlement. In her description of the homestead of Sarah A. Stearns, Martha M. Parr offered the following picture: "With the help of two hired men, Sarah set about building a small one-story frame house and establishing a new home for her sons. She raised sweet potatoes, corn, sugarcane and peas. One of the several orange trees she planted around the house still stands as a landmark, though the house is gone and the property has long-since changed hands."³ Although she was drawing a scene from the era of the Civil War, the validity of the pioneering homestead pictured in the above held true throughout most of the 1880s and 1890s. This can be seen in Ms. Parr’s 1981 Sunland Tribune article about the Davis and Miley families of Thonotosassa where she notes that they, "built first a log house, then what they called "the big house," and eventually a third house which is still standing in good repair and occupied today. Some of the orange trees he (uncle Met) planted are still bearing fruit."⁴ Mrs. Charles Gibson, in her book, Pioneering in Hillsborough County, Fla., also notes that

Citrus grove planting in the Temple Terrace area in 1921.
-Photo courtesy of Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library System
oranges and, peaches grew in abundance in early Hillsborough County and that they were frequently served at such occasions as weddings, reunions, etc. Everyone, it appears, grew oranges or some type of citrus fruit on their homestead.

In the 1880 census, the total value attributed to "orchard products" is given as $49,268. While this may have represented a significant income from the citrus crops, it pales in comparison with the other standby of Hillsborough’s agricultural community, livestock, which in the same year was valued at $225,049. This census group included all horses, mules, cows and cattle and therefore is difficult to use in showing any individual category’s worth, however, as cattle had long been the mainstay of Hillsborough’s agriculture, it may be assumed that the majority of this value can be attributed to this designation. The Descriptive Pamphlet quoted above had the following to say about the cattle "interest" of Hillsborough County:

No other industry in South Florida up to within a few years past was engaged in near so extensively or by any means embraced as much capital as that which is commonly known as stock-growing, the principal and chief branch of which pursued in this county being the raising of cattle of the more important stamp. Until quite recently more wealth and riches have accrued to the dealer through this investment than any other, a fact which conspicuously explains the number of shrewd men connected with it. Even the tillage of the soil was a secondary matter. And at present, as in the past, in all parts of the county are to be found numerous herds of larger or smaller cattle. They are permitted by their owners to run at large through the woods, and they thrive and prosper in a manner remarkably well and entirely satisfactory to the parties interested. The prosperity of the cattle interest was one of the major reasons for the general prosperity of Hillsborough County, but it did have a price.

As the pamphlet noted, the cattle were allowed to roam freely through the woods. What it did not say was that they could roam nearly everywhere without supervision or control. This brought about some serious confrontations with the growing urban population of Hillsborough County. According to the Florida Dispatch, the voice of the Florida Fruit Growers, the leading cattlemen of the 1880s were W. B. Henderson, Jonah Yates, J. T Lesley and H. T Lykes, together with the other Hillsborough cattlemen represented a total number of cattle of about 21,223. This number increased as the decade wore on and began to trouble urbanites with their trampling of gardens and lawns. As Karl Grismer stated in his history of Tampa, "Ordinances banning the roaming creatures from the city had been passed repeatedly in the past but the "cowlovers" had so much political strength that not until after the Spanish-American War were the laws enforced." In 1894, when the Consumers Electric Light and Railway Company built its dam on the Hillsborough River, hundreds of acres of former pasture land, now owned by Consumers, became flooded. Four years later, on December 13, 1898, the cattlemen, it was assumed, had the dam blown up and the waters rushed into their former channel. There was no prosecution of the perpetrators of this deed and Consumers took a financial loss from which it did not recover. This type of confrontation did not end until the
famed "fence-law" battles ended in the late 1940s.

The most important event for the agricultural history of Hillsborough County was the coming of the railroad. Not until the coming of the railroad was there a profitable market of significance to spur the growth of Tampa and Hillsborough County. Henry Plant, the 1880s "founder of Tampa," once stated, after a dinner in his honor in 1886, in remembrance of the opening of his railroad in late 1883: "A citizen told me on that visit that they did not value the land at anything, but the air was worth one thousand dollars an acre. That gave the value of Tampa land at that time. All are aware what is the value of Tampa land at present." The impact of the railroad on land values may be seen in the fact that in the census of 1880, the value of all farms and improvements was given as $583,767. In 1890, the value had risen to $2,964,910, even though the number of farms reporting had only increased by 22. When one compares the statistics for the growth of the value of livestock and the number of acres of improved lands, in which little actual growth appears between the 1880 and 1890 census figures, the astounding growth of the value of land and improvements can only be attributed to the actual increase in land values incident upon the arrival of the railroad. The demand for Hillsborough land was very high and by 1897, only 3,746 acres remained open to homestead entry at the United States Land Office in Gainesville, seventh lowest in the entire state behind some of the older settled counties like Jefferson, Columbia and Duval.

According to Huchinson Smyth’s Life of Henry Bradley Plant, the New York Daily Tribune for November 17, 1891 reported about Tampa: "Owing to its extreme isolation, its growth was slow, and, in 1884, there were not more than one or two shops, and a population of a little less than seven hundred. A year later the southern terminus of the Plant System of railroads was established at Tampa, and since then the growth of the place has been phenomenal."
A Hillsborough County Cabbage Patch

-Collection of Tampa Historical Society
This growth is born out by the population statistics for the 1895 census which shows the total number of people in Hillsborough County as increasing from 14,941 in 1890 to 31,362 just five years later. The city of Tampa had grown to become the third largest city in the state as a result of the tremendous growth. The population had grown to 15,634, third behind only Jacksonville and Key West. There was, indeed, just cause to call Mr. Plant, the Founder of Tampa.

The mid-1890s brought with them the "Great Freeze" and the desolation of the northern Florida citrus industry. The counties of Putnam, Duval, Nassau and St. Johns suffered tremendous losses and few recovered from the blow. Boom-time expansion left numerous ghost-towns across the northern Florida landscape when the freeze nipped this new growth in the bud. Hillsborough, however, was not a loser in the downturn after the "Great Freeze" and actually expanded. As Grismer has explained: "In the long run, Hillsborough County gained more from the Big Freeze than it lost. Citrus growers who had been wiped out in the northern part of the peninsula moved southward to sections where the cold had not been so severe or so prolonged. Hillsborough County became the heart of the new citrus belt and, as a result, Tampa profited greatly." His point is well taken and borne out by the increase in the number of farms reporting in Hillsborough County in the census of 1900. This census shows the number of farms increasing from 779 in 1890 to 1449 in 1900 and the number of acres of improved land rising from 13,518 in the former year to 22,346 in the latter.

The growth of the railroad was coupled in Hillsborough County by the rapid rise of the amount of shipping leaving the ports serving the area. In the year following the freeze, nearly 2,000 vessels arrived at Tampa Bay carrying a total tonnage estimated to be 625,744 tons. The estimated total value of all trade in this same year was an astounding $16,280,157. The biggest "Item" of trade within this large number was simply "merchandise," which totalled over $11,000,000. By 1900, just three short years, Rowland H. Rerick reported that the total value of exports was $15,188,912 and imports to Tampa $2,905,310, thus showing a total trade of a little over $18,000,000, an increase of nearly $2,000,000. These figures do not appear to reflect any of the trade generated by the Spanish American War, however, Rerick's numbers were generated by the Tampa Board of Trade and may reflect some of this trade inadvertently. Much of the normal trade with Cuba, especially in cigars, was diverted from the shipping lanes to the northern states. By the time the World War began, in 1914, the trade at the Port of Tampa and other points in Hillsborough County had grown to slightly over $37,000,000. The growth in volume and value of this immense trade fully justified the Army Corps of Engineers in their recommendations to improve the channels and harbors of Hillsborough County.

Although the "Great Freeze" actually assisted in spurring the growth of Hillsborough County, its immediate effects were to put more emphasis on other crops as alternatives to those of the citrus family. Two of the crops looked to were strawberries and celery, with snap beans as a second crop on the strawberry lands. The section around Plant City was widely known for its high quality strawberries from about the turn of the century until the present day. As early as 1910-1920, about 700 acres of land were devoted to the growing of this valuable crop. Most of the celery was grown in the vicinity of Tampa, near the Gary
section. Some celery was also grown on the drained lands near Wimauma and Mango Lake. Other "truck" crops grown for shipment included tomatoes, Irish potatoes, cucumbers, eggplant, peppers and squash. By the time of the 1910 census, the total area given to truck farming in Hillsborough County amounted to 3,719 acres. Truck farming, along with citrus crops, became the way most farmers in Hillsborough County made money at the beginning of the twentieth century.

The land and soils of Hillsborough County were ideal for this new agriculture. As reported in the "Soil Survey of Hillsborough County, Florida," done in 1916: "It is generally recognized that the higher lying, well-drained soils, especially those situated near bodies of water, are best suited to the production of citrus fruits. The elevated position facilitates air drainage, and the modifying influence of the water makes injury by frost less likely to occur. The lower lying soils, on account of their better moisture condition, are best for truck crops." The same report noted that the Scranton fine sand, found in abundance near Plant City, was the ideal soil for strawberries and was also fine for tomatoes, beans, peppers and eggplants. The Norfolk and Gainesville series of soils were most desirable for the production of citrus and was plentiful in the lake region of Hillsborough County. The reclaimed lands and lower muck soils found near Tampa proved to be productive for celery. As Rerick noted with some pride: "Celery is a crop of no small commercial importance in South Florida. Planted in such rich muck lands as are near Tampa, Sanford and Kissimmee, it has been found to produce heavy crops not inferior to the best Kalamazoo celery. During the past several years a good many car loads have been shipped from Tampa in bulk ..." By 1910, Hillsborough ranked third in the production of strawberries, behind Bradford and Polk Counties, third in the production of oranges, following Orange and DeSoto Counties, and seventh in number of acres committed to growing "All other vegetables" in the state of Florida.

The growth of strawberry farming can be seen in the fact that by 1920, Hillsborough County, led by the Plant City fields, passed Bradford County to lead the state in the value of its crop. The production of strawberries reached a 459,353 quarts, compared to Bradford County's 422,034 quarts. The total of the two counties accounted for nearly three-fourths of the state's entire production of strawberries. The rapid increase in the production of Hillsborough County's strawberry crop held on throughout the next two census recordings. The 1930 census showed that Hillsborough County accounted for over 5,000,000 quarts of strawberries, a figure that represents nearly the total for the next three closest competitors and about three-fourths of the state's total production. By 1940, this figure rose 7,571,153 quarts of strawberries, more than half of the total production for Florida. These figures represent a substantial production for Hillsborough County's agriculture and show the importance of this production to the state's total output.

The orange crops for these same years show that Hillsborough County was a leading producer of Florida's famed fruit. In the 1920 census, the county ranked seventh in the total number of boxes produced. By the next census, it had risen to fourth place, behind Polk, Orange and Lake Counties in boxes produced. The 1940 census shows that Hillsborough County held its position as the fourth overall producer of oranges in Florida, with 1,246,280 boxes packed. The
majority of these were early and mid-season varieties of oranges. It should be noted, however, that all of these statistics include tangerines as oranges, which some studies today do not. The unfortunate lack of dollar values for these crops makes it difficult to evaluate the impact of other events on growth of production.

This is not true of the value of livestock, which is given in nearly every census. During the period extending from 1900 to 1940, there is ample evidence of the impact of events such as economic boom (the 1920s) and depression (1930s). The value for all livestock given in the 1900 census was placed at $364,743, which more than doubled in the 1910 census to $872,964. The $1,091,088 of the 1920 census indicates further growth of the livestock’s value, however, because this information is not recorded in the mid-census year of 1925, we do not have reliable information to evaluate the impact of the Florida land boom. But, the decline in livestock values indicated in the 1930 census (as sum of $904,445) does show how the depression of the era brought down income and value of livestock in Hillsborough County. The modest increase in the value of livestock to $1,106,640 shown in the 1940 census gives a rough estimation of the slow nature of the recovery from the nation’s Great Depression in Hillsborough County. 

The impact of the Great Depression upon Hillsborough County’s agricultural community can best be seen by the value of farms and improvements recorded by the census. According to the census of 1930, the value of farm land, buildings, implements and machinery for 1920 was $10,143,837, which rose to a staggering $24,977,390 in 1925. With the boom’s collapse and the onset of the depression, the values dropped to $16,721,990 in 1930. By 1940, the value had dropped even further to $15,521,851, thus indicating that, even on the eve of World War II, Hillsborough’s agriculture had not yet totally recovered from the Great Depression.

Another impact of the Great Depression can be seen by the census data. The number of farms actually increased from 1930 to 1940, as did the acreage of improved land. This indicates that many people, hurt by the lack of industrial employment, went back to the farm to try and ride out the impact of the Great Depression. Indeed, the number of acres of improved land registered in the 1940 census is the largest figure in that category from 1880 until 1940, and is nearly 2,000 acres greater than the boom-time statistic given for 1925. Thus, it would appear that more people resided upon farms in Hillsborough County in part because of the long-term impact of the Great Depression and the need to simply survive.

The above summary of some of the findings concerning the agricultural history of Hillsborough County indicates a growth and variety not found in all parts of the state. Hillsborough County’s agricultural history is diverse and productive and, at times, shows this county’s leadership in certain fields. As this is only meant to be a brief introduction to this county’s rich agricultural heritage, it is hoped that other investigators can pick up where we are leaving off, for the present, and begin more thorough research into this field. Throughout the state, there is a crying need for good agricultural history, not only county by county, but from a statewide perspective. It is hoped that the above research will lead to more investigation into Hillsborough County’s wealth of agricultural history and begin the process of weaving the state’s agricultural past into the beautiful tapestry we know that it is.
ENDNOTES


7 For good discussions of the importance of the cattle industry to Hillsborough County, I would recommend Canter Brown, Jr.'s, controversial "Tampa’s James McKay and the Frustration of Confederate Cattle-Supply Operations in South Florida" in Florida Historical Quarterly. 70(April 1992): 409-433. And Robert A. Taylor's "Rebel Storehouse: Florida in the Confederate Economy." Florida State University, Doctoral Dissertation, Fall 1991. Although not contemporary to the time period of this article, they indicate the historical importance of the cattle industry to the growth and prosperity of Hillsborough County.

8 Descriptive Pamphlet., 49.


14 Smyth. Life of Henry Bradley Plant. 75.


16 Ibid. 14-15. For a further discussion of the growth of Tampa during the Plant era, see Grismer, 174-78.

17 Grismer. Tampa. 203.


20 Ibid.


22 United States House of Representatives Document No. 1345. 64th Congress, 1st. Session. 1916. 23.


24 Ibid. 757.


