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White Caps and Nightmares: Prelude to Violence against Blacks in Florida during the Spanish-American War

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*W*HITE CAPS AND NIGHTMARES:
 PRELUDE TO VIOLENCE AGAINST BLACKS IN
 FLORIDA DURING THE SPANISH-AMERICAN WAR

BY PAMELA N. GIBSON AND JOE KNETSCH

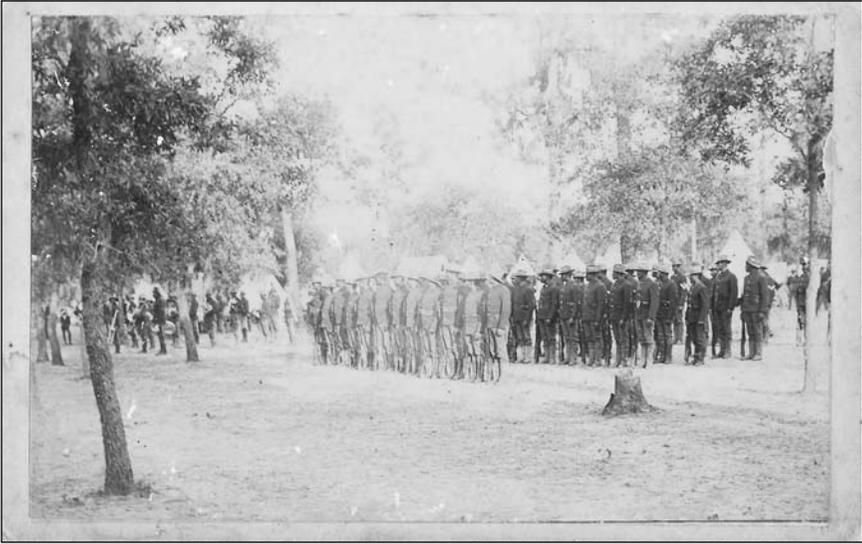
*There is about as much respect for the constitution of the United States
 in the southern states as there is for the Bible in Hades.*

The editorial statement above from the *Kansas City American Citizen* was made in reference to the murder of a black postmaster in South Carolina but was equally applicable to most of the southern states in the era of the “Redeemers” and their compatriots.¹ As the same newspaper noted in its February 24, 1898, issue: “The southern statesmen who plead for Cuba could learn a valuable lesson by looking around their own bloodcurdling confines of butchery.” With a few exceptions, the African American press of the day was not eager to see blacks sent off to fight for Cuban freedom when they were lacking the guarantee of these same freedoms in America. It seems ironic, from the perspective of the twenty-first century, that the country could ask its black citizens to risk life and limb for the freedom of Cuba but deny the same to its own black population. As historian Rayford Logan has noted, the 1890s marked the nadir of race relations in the United States and was the decade with the highest number of recorded incidents of violence against African Americans. At the same time the United States was asking its “colored soldiers” to help liberate Cuba, it tolerated the passing of the Grandfather Clause in Louisiana, the growth of Jim Crow laws everywhere in the South, and the approval of the Sheats law in

¹ *Kansas City American Citizen*, February 24, 1898. Quoted in *The Black Press Views American Imperialism (1898-1900)*. Edited by George P. Marks III. New York: Arno Press, 1971. 11.

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Tampa Bay History Center Collection

African American soldiers in the 24th and 25th Infantry regiments were camped near their white counterparts in Tampa Heights during the buildup before the Spanish-American War. Members of one of those regiments are pictured here standing behind a row of white soldiers.

Florida, which punished white teachers for attempting to educate black students.

Florida's role in the Spanish-American War era did not reflect well on the state. Almost everyone is familiar with the famous story told in *The Little War of Private Post* about Post's duty in Lakeland and the response of the sheriff to any attempt to put down what he perceived as black violence. The sheriff's policy was, "plenty of bourbon for the white man, but no gin for the nigger."² Tampa experienced more than one explosive incident when the black troopers arrived. One of the more infamous took place when an Ohio volunteer unit made a sport of shooting at a two-year-old black child to see how close they could come without hitting him. When the Twenty-fourth and Twenty-fifth Infantry units heard of the shooting, they went on a rampage, trying to find the culprits and teach them a lesson. A Georgia volunteer unit was called in to put down the riot, which saw many businesses burned down, and the outnumbered Buffalo Soldiers took some casualties, with thirty injured, some seriously.³ The *Brooklyn Eagle* reported on May 25, 1898, that the situation in Key West was basically a "Reign of Terror" and that there was a call for martial law. All of this was reportedly caused by "Jackies, negroes and roughs of many classes."⁴

² C. J. Post, *The Little War of Private Post* (Boston: Little Brown, 1960), 53.

³ Robert B. Edgerton, *Hidden Heroism: Black Soldiers in America's Wars* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 2002), 49.

As these few examples demonstrate, there were real problems for African American troops coming through Florida to fight for Cuba's freedom, problems that were deep-seated and also those of recent origin.

More recent scholarship by Dennis Halpin clearly demonstrates Tampa's reaction to the arrival of armed black troops in its midst. Noting that much of Tampa's white population refused to give up its time-honored segregation, the black soldiers confronted their opponents in a number of ways. Some took to writing letters that reached national audiences, others bore themselves proudly in public and carried their arms, and still others sometimes forcibly attempted to flout the laws and enter all-white establishments and insist on service. As Halpin states: "During their stay in Tampa the racial tensions inherent in the Jim Crow South exploded onto the public stage. Black troops shot out a barber shop's windows; destroyed bars and saloons during a race riot, and with the help of sympathetic white troops, flagrantly violated Jim Crow mores." Confrontations also occurred during their passage back north after the war, mostly in attempts to free fellow soldiers and citizens they believed unjustly imprisoned.⁵ David Work has shown that the regular black soldiers, in this case the Tenth Cavalry, were viewed as a threat to the Jim Crow order of Tampa, and that the willingness of these armed, assertive men to flout every convention of the day served to infuriate much of the white population.⁶ The "Buffalo Soldiers" had experienced great acceptance and appreciation in the West, but they had not served east of the Mississippi River since Reconstruction. They and their white detractors were not prepared for the clash that came with the mobilization for the Spanish-American War. But was there more to the story than simple race prejudice?

Following the Panic of 1893, two devastating freezes decimated Florida's winter crops. In the midst of these economic disasters, beginning about October 1894 and lasting until late 1896, there occurred a series of violent assaults against African American laborers and other minorities. Our analysis of these incidents leads us to believe that the stresses caused by the sharp decline in economic opportunity became a major causal factor in the increase in violence against African Americans during this brief period of dislocation. Much of the reported violence took place in the surviving citrus-growing areas or against workers in the timber or related industries, the traditional fall-back employment of working-class Floridians.

The Panic of 1893 has been described by one historian as a "spectacular financial crisis."⁷ The Reading, Erie, Northern Pacific, Union Pacific and Santa Fe Railroads were sent reeling into the hands of receivers, and before the panic had run its course, nearly one-fourth of the railroad capitalization in the country was

⁴ Brooklyn *Eagle*, May 25, 1898.

⁵ Dennis Halpin, "'Race Riot,' 'Midnight Melee,' and Other 'Crimes' Reconsidered: African-American Soldiers' Protest in 1898 Tampa," *Gulf South Historical Review* 20 (Spring 2005): 39.

⁶ David Work, "A More Deadly Enemy: The Tenth Cavalry in the South, 1898-1899," *Gulf South Historical Review* 20 (Spring 2005): 65.

⁷ Elmer Ellis, *Dictionary of American History*.

in the hands of bankruptcy courts and 60 percent of railroad stocks had suspended dividend payments.⁸ The nation's financial affairs were in near chaos with a highly restrictive tariff and the repercussions of the Bland-Allison Act of 1878 and the Sherman Silver Purchase Act of 1890. Confidence in the currency coupled with a severe balance-of-payments problem led to a rapid decline of gold reserves and an increase in foreign demand for gold in payment for goods and services. A prolonged agricultural recession, beginning in the late 1880s, simply added to the depth of the short, but brutal, depression.⁹ Increased labor violence, prolonged strikes, the rise of the silverites, and the march of Coxey's Army on Washington, D.C., marked the panic as an epic in American economic history.

For Florida, the arrival of the panic in the spring of 1893 coincided with the end of a superlative winter citrus crop and an abundance of vegetables like celery, tomatoes, and lettuce. By virtue of this oversupply and the general deflation caused by the government's gold policy, the prices for and profits from these cash crops were lower than expected. The credit crunch put extra pressure on Florida's agriculturalists and forced many into short-run default on their loans. With a gloomy economic picture ahead, many Floridians were worried about the 1893-94 crop.

But not all Floridians were depressed by the short turn of fortune. In its editorial for September 21, 1893, the Bradenton-based *Manatee River Journal* summarized its views:

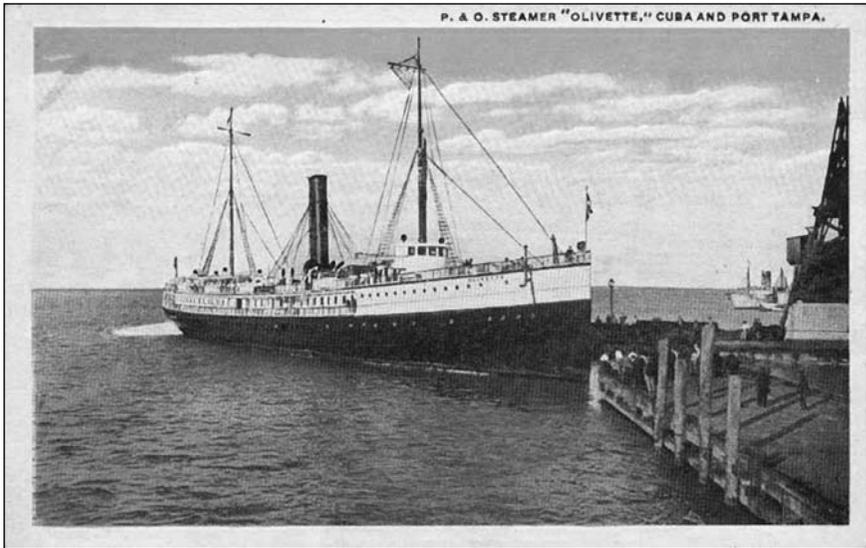
The following figures broaden our idea of the financial panic of 1893, now drawing to a close, three great railway systems have passed into the hands of the receiver, two more are on the verge of bankruptcy, all other railroads have taken off many trains and discharged hundreds of men. Five hundred banks have closed, 800 manufactories have shut down, 6,000 merchants have failed and 900,000 operators have been thrown out of work. It was terrible: we are not yet out of the woods. But the prospects are that money will be more plentiful for investment in goods, loans and industries than ever before.

This optimism was brief, and by February 1, 1894, the editor of the same newspaper warned of "Bad Summer Prospects":

It is well that the people of this county realize, during this, our most prosperous season, that the summer of 1894 cannot open with the most brilliant prospects. The necessary extension of credit during the phenomenally hard year which has passed has exhausted the capital

⁸ Samuel E. Morison and Henry Steele Commager, *The Growth of the American Republic*, vol. 2. 4th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956), 250.

⁹ Jonathan Hughes, *American Economic History*, 2nd ed. (Glenview, Ill.: Scott, Foresman, 1987), 360-61. A good contemporary debate on the causes of the financial woes can be found in William M. Springer, H. W. Cannon, and J. Stirling Morton, "Our Financial Muddle," *North American Review* 359 (February 1895): 129-56. The congressman, banker, and secretary of the treasury all had strongly differing views as to the cause of the Panic of 1893 and offered different financial remedies.



Tampa Bay History Center Collection

The *Olivette* was one of the larger steamships in the Plant Steamship Line. Henry Plant's companies held a virtual monopoly on shipping in the Tampa Bay area in the mid-1880s and early 1890s.

of the country. For provisions, grain, fertilizer, farming tools, crate materials and interest on loans, we are seriously in debt beyond any time in the past within the next three months, taxes must be paid. The orange crop brought on this year's sale even less than last year. On account of the poverty of the North this winter, there is every reason to expect prices of vegetables will be disastrously behind in proportion. And out of what we do get, we must pay about \$10,000 higher freight than last year. This is a plain statement of the financial prospects of the summer before us.

Just ten days prior to the publication of this editorial, the *Manatee River Journal* had complained to its readers about the increase of fifteen cents per crate and thirty cents per barrel now charged by the Plant Steamship Line. This line controlled much of the shipping out of the Manatee River vicinity, and the editor believed that the line was gouging the local growers-shippers.¹⁰

The dominance of the Plant Line and the increased costs to shippers led to an open meeting of the local fruit growers that soon became statewide. The growers began to seriously organize in early 1894, and, at their second meeting they elected

¹⁰ *Manatee River Journal*, January 22, 1894.

Judge E. M. Graham of Manatee as president, and A. T. Cromwell of Bradenton [Braidentown] was named secretary. The primary resolution of the meeting declared: "the recent action of the Plant Line in raising the freight to the west via Mobile, in the present stringency of the finances of the country, will result in taking from us our just reward of our toil, and under the circumstances becomes a matter of hardship and oppression." The group then pledged themselves to patronize any other carrier who would offer reasonable rates.¹¹

It may illustrate the burden felt by these operators to note that through January 1, 1894, the Manatee area shipped 200,000 crates of fruit and vegetables. Their freight and wharfage averaged about seventy-five cents per crate, or approximately \$150,000 spent simply to ship the fruit to market. The increase in the freight charge, coming in the midst of a severe depression, added an additional \$30,000 to the costs, with little hope of return. In its editorial for February 1, 1894, the *Manatee River Journal* concluded: "If we cannot combine to protect our products there is one other course open. We must raise what we can eat, if the most rigid economy and frugality are not practiced this spring and summer, there will be homeless families in Manatee County and greater suffering than we have ever known. We cannot afford to pass this summer in idleness. This must be a year of summer crops, a year to measure the fairest possibilities of the country."

Manatee County native M. E. Gillett led the statewide campaign to organize the citrus and vegetable growers and met with some initial success.¹² Yet, the severity of the depression made any organizing difficult. The *Jacksonville Florida Times-Union*, the state's leading newspaper, noted that large numbers of people were being displaced by the economic downturn and that unemployment in twenty southern cities had reached approximately 42,000, with 122,000 dependents or family members added to the mixture of sufferers.¹³ C. Vann Woodward described the scene in neighboring Georgia as follows: "Banks failed, money disappeared, factories closed, unemployed workers returned to the family farm to add burden to its meager larder, and the mortgage foreclosures went forward at an accelerated pace. Families of Negro and white tenants walked the roads seeking relief. At no time since the devastation of Georgia by an invading army was acute poverty, hunger and misery so widespread among the people."¹⁴ Many of these wandering relief seekers came to Florida where, after the immediate depression subsided, citrus, railroads, lumbering, truck-farming, phosphate mining, and the growing tourist industry offered some hope of economic independence.

¹¹ Ibid., February 1, 1894.

¹² *Jacksonville Daily Florida Citizen*, June 2, 1894. This particular article concerns Gillette's successful meeting in Hawthorne, in Alachua County. Throughout the 1894-95 period, the Jacksonville papers covered his exploits and the increasing power of the organization. Its time was cut short by the severity of the freezes and the loss of membership because of people leaving the citrus industry and giving up their farms.

¹³ *Florida Times-Union*, January 8, 1894.

¹⁴ C. Vann Woodward, *Tom Watson: Agrarian Rebel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963), 249.

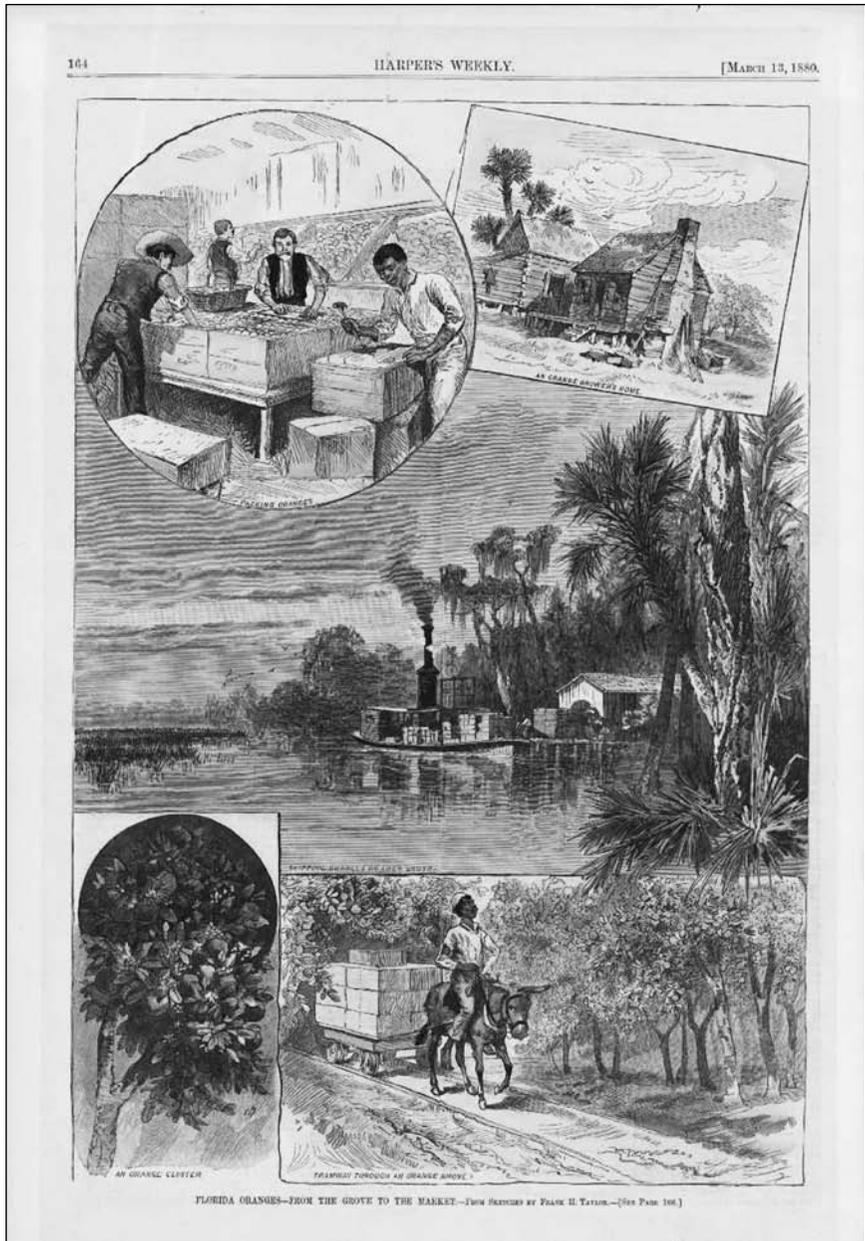
Other factors were also sending African Americans to Florida in record numbers. The rise of the Populist movement throughout the South raised the specter of a united front between white and African American tenant farmers and sharecroppers. The dominant Bourbon factions and others immediately put out the cry of “Negro domination,” which quickly reinjected the race question into all levels of partisan politics. The “white supremacy” argument always carried the frightened Negrophobe at the polls and helped to defeat the Populist tickets in many southern states, especially Georgia, where race always trumped class-consciousness.¹⁵ The political scene was not improved for African Americans by the rejection of the so-called Force Bill plank put forward by the Negro Alliance, the Colored Farmers Alliance, and the Cooperative Union at the Populists’ Ocala Convention. The White Alliance men simply refused to protect the rights of their African American colleagues through federal action, opting instead for a weakly worded resolution asserting their commitment to protecting “the Negro’s right to vote.” The irony here was that, as Herbert Shapiro pointed out, “the Populists were for using federal machinery to protect the general economic interests of agrarians; they would not use that machinery to protect the constitutional rights of Negroes.”¹⁶ Similar incidents occurred, and the message that many African Americans took away was that the Populist Party would not be protecting their voting or any other rights. The violence associated with many of the elections held during this period sent many African Americans on the road, hopefully wending their way to freedom from racial attacks and want.¹⁷

The well-documented and known racism of northern labor unions precluded African Americans from entering many of the more lucrative trades there. This, coupled with the unfamiliar colder climate of the northern cities, acted as a deterrent to any major northward migration of African Americans during the 1880s and 1890s. Word of these conditions filtered back home from those who had first attempted this transition. The disrespect or outright contempt for African American leaders such as Booker T. Washington or Frederick Douglass, especially by the Populists,

¹⁵ Charleton Mosely, “Latent Klanism in Georgia, 1890-1915,” *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 56 (Spring 1972): 368. See also Francis Wihoit, “An Interpretation of Populism’s Impact on the Georgia Negro,” *Journal of Negro History* 52 (April 1967): 116-27; and Clarence A. Bacote, “Negro Proscriptions, Protests, and Proposed Solutions in Georgia, 1880-1908,” *Journal of Southern History* 35 (November 1959): 471-76. Finally, see William Warren Rogers et al., *Alabama: The History of a Deep South State* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1996), 305-19. The authors note that politics in Alabama had become, “a wild three-ringed circus.” Not surprisingly, the African American vote went to the Bourbon candidates and not to the Populist, led by Reuben Kolb.

¹⁶ Herbert Shapiro, “The Populists and the Negro: A Reconsideration,” in *The Making of Black America*, ed. August Meier and Elliott Rudwick (New York: Atheneum, 1969), 32-34.

¹⁷ Lawrence Goodwyn, “Populist Dreams and Negro Rights: East Texas as a Case Study,” in *African Americans and Southern Politics from Redemption to Disfranchisement*, ed. Donald G. Nieman (New York: Garland, 1994), 1435-56. See also Goodwyn’s *The Populist Moment: A Short History of the Agrarian Revolt in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978). One should also consult two standard histories of two important leaders of the agrarian movement: C. Vann Woodward’s *Tom Watson: Agrarian Rebel*; and Francis B. Simkins’s *Pitchfork Ben Tillman: South Carolinian* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1967), 195-233.



Tampa Bay History Center Collection

This page from the March 13, 1880 issue of *Harper's Weekly* magazine depicts the citrus industry "from the grove to the market." Though the image is from 1880, the process was basically the same through the end of the 19th century.

demonstrated to many the gap that remained to be bridged, even by highly regarded African Americans.¹⁸ The well-publicized failure and ridicule of the “Back to Africa” movement also showed that this option was probably closed to those willing to leave home. Thus, it is not surprising that African Americans migrated to Florida in large numbers; indeed, six times as many blacks came to Florida in the 1890s as did whites.

This influx of unemployed African Americans began putting strains on Florida. As early as December 1893, a racial disturbance took place in the railroad junction town of Wildwood that caused consternation across the state. The report filed on January 3, 1894, indicates the intensity, if not the cause, of the event:

It is fortunate that the revolt against legal authority at Wildwood was suppressed with so little bloodshed, and the ringleaders who tried to set law at defiance are safely behind bars. It cannot be fairly considered a race war, although the revolt was headed by members of the colored race. It was an outbreak of lawlessness on the part of a few colored persons who have hitherto been inclined to resent the interference of law when it interfered with their doing as they pleased. It was aimed at authority rather than at whites as such. That it is now over is a cause for congratulation, and it is hoped that another insurrection will not occur.¹⁹

It was not unusual for editors to make a story of this kind “disappear” by placing it in the middle of the paper. Florida newspapers sought to focus instead on the optimistic forecast for the coming year’s crops.

As the dispossessed tenants of other southern states moved into Florida, other disturbances were reported. On January 13, 1894, St. Augustine was reported to be experiencing trouble with “tramps.”²⁰ Eleven days later, at Anthony, nine so-called tramps were released to a mob by the local Marshall. According to the account, a crowd of “hoodlums” gathered around the jail, whereupon “the Marshall unlocked the door, ordered the poor fellows out and told them to run. It is also said the Marshall told the boys, who had sticks in their hands, to go for the tramps.” Not until a brave, unnamed, soul stepped in to stop the beating did the assault end.²¹ At the other end of the state, riots took place in Key West, as Cuban cigar makers tried to earn a living in the face of local opposition. The fact that many of these men and women were dark-skinned led the *Florida Times-Union* to run the headline “Key West’s Race Clash.”²² With the winter crops beginning to come to market, these were not headlines that owners and shippers wanted to see.

The winter crop season of 1894-95 was supposed to be the savior of many citrus growers. However, even before the freeze hit the state, labor violence between

¹⁸ See Robert Saunders, “Southern Populists and the Negro, 1893-1895,” *African Americans and Southern Politics from Redemption to Disfranchisement*, ed. Donald G. Nieman (New York: Garland, 1994), 240-61.

¹⁹ *Florida Times-Union*, January 3, 1894.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, January 13, 1894.

²¹ *Ibid.*, January 24, 1894.

²² *Ibid.*, January 18, 1894.

the races had begun in Manatee County. In late October, two African American employees of the Manatee Lemon Company were assaulted by three white men while walking along a public road in Palmetto. The three young white men proceeded to strike their black victims several times and shot one in the leg as he attempted to run away. The local manager of the Manatee Lemon Company, a Mr. Larson, encouraged one of the workers to sign an affidavit, and the three white men were arrested. However, as was typical when black victims sought legal redress for such crimes, the victims were said to have failed to properly identify the perpetrators, who were then released. In a seemingly bizarre twist in this case, the victims, as well as the alleged criminals, were required to post bond to guarantee a court appearance, and when the victims could not produce the required fee, they were jailed! The justice of the peace, a Mr. Wright, soon learned that he had overstepped his authority and released the victims. No record exists showing that the assailants were ever brought to trial or justice rendered to the two African Americans.²³

Shortly thereafter, the “Great Freeze” of 1894-95 began, with the last four days of December seeing the majority of citrus trees in northern Florida die under the killing frost. Vegetable crops also suffered greatly in the northern part of the state. Although some damage was sustained in Hillsborough and Manatee Counties, the region survived the first freeze with relative ease. Captain C. O. Muller, a longtime resident of Manatee County, during an interview with the *Manatee River Journal*, had actually observed the freezes of 1866, 1874, and 1886, and each, he implied, was worse than the one most recently experienced.²⁴ The greatest loss was sustained by the nurserymen, like the Reasoner Brothers, who lost over 15,000 buds. Although the more southerly sections of the state were to experience some of the damage of the second freeze, of February 8, 1895, the northern portions of the state were now facing severe choices; bankruptcy, emigration, and stiff economic competition with the largest group of the most recent immigration, the African Americans.²⁵

The economic damage is easily estimated; however, the costs to the social fabric of Florida were much greater. The “Great Freeze” had wiped out many of the smaller and poorer citrus growers. Many had packed up their meager belongings and left the state. Others, with a longer commitment to Florida and stronger family ties, attempted to maintain themselves by moving farther south and harvesting the crops grown in this area or by attempting to fall back on more traditional cash-producing occupations, like tie-cutting and lumbering. In this latter, concentrated mostly in the northern portion of the state, these newly displaced individuals came in direct competition with the newly arrived African American laborers. One of the first

²³ *Manatee River Journal*, November 1, 1894.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, January 3, 1895.

²⁵ For information on the nurserymen, see *Manatee River Journal*, January 3, 1895. For the effects of the freeze on Hillsborough County, some of which were positive for later growth, see Joe Knetsch and Laura Etheridge, “A Brief Outline of the Agricultural History of Hillsborough County: 1880-1940,” *Sunland Tribune* (Tampa Bay Historical Society) 19 (November 1993): 19.



Courtesy of the Florida State Archives

The Freeze of 1894-95 was one of the most devastating natural disasters to strike Florida in the 19th century. Countless groves and growers were impacted, and the “freeze line,” an imaginary line that dictates the northernmost limits for citrus growing, shifted dramatically to the southern portion of Central Florida.

serious incidents of violence against this group came in Westville, in rural Holmes County. In that section of the state, Graves and Beatty had “large lumber interest” and had constructed a tram road into the heart of their holdings from the banks of the Choctawhatchee River. Several of the tram cars were fitted with bunk beds for the use of the African American labor force. About one o’clock on Sunday morning, September 8, 1895, the workers awoke “to find the leaden missiles of death whistling all about them.” The shooting and the subsequent screams of the wounded aroused the white foreman from the nearby house, and his arrival on the scene caused the masked assailants to flee. One man died instantly at the scene and another shortly thereafter, while “several” were reported wounded. The report continued: “The negroes are in terror, fearing they will be murdered, and they have refused to work any longer. Many of them have left and come to towns along the railroad where they can secure protection.”²⁶ The outcome was exactly what the “masked men” had wanted from the blacks—terror and flight.

A second incident took place at Moss Bluff, on the scenic Ocklawaha River. Here, W. Allsop, described as a “merchant and tie contractor of Wiersdale,” had hired a number of African American tie cutters to fulfill a contract in the Long Swamp and Moss Bluff areas. The report filed in the *Florida Times-Union* stated: “These had not

²⁶ *Florida Times-Union*, September 10, 1895.

been at work over a day, when the white laborers took exception. That night a party of white men riddled the cabins of the dusky sleepers with bullets. The result is that the colored tie cutters are missing. The hint was sufficient and they did not stand on the order of their going."²⁷ More than two weeks later, on December 5, 1895, the same paper, under the headline "Whitecaps Prevent Work," reported Allsop as saying that the White Caps "had so successfully intimidated the negroes that he could not get one to cut a tie for him."²⁸ Like the night riders of the old Klan, the cowardly attacks by whites on the African American laborers worked to intimidate them and to prevent them, this time from working.

One of the most instructive incidents of intimidation took place in the citrus-growing town of Fort Myers. The evidence at hand indicates that the steamer *Lawrence* was sent to Fort Myers with a number of laborers on board, designated to pick oranges. On December 7, 1895, the *Tampa Morning Tribune* reported:

The big crowd of would-be orange pickers who went down to Fort Myers on the first trip made by the steamer *Lawrence* last Sunday are having a rough time of it, if all accounts are correct, and the speculators who are responsible for the trouble should be promptly called to account. There were about 175 people on board the boat, about 75 being negroes, who had been scraped up in Tampa by a genius of a speculative turn of mind who had agreed to take them down and find them steady employment for \$1.00 a head and 10 per cent of their first week's wages. When the *Lawrence* and her darkeys tied up at the dock she was met by a deputation of prominent citizens who politely, but firmly informed the people in charge of the expedition that while the white men were welcome, the negro laborers could not land. In the meantime, the unfortunate darkeys had managed to reach the wharf, and while the controversy was going on between the citizen's committee and the speculator, the steamer quietly pulled out and left them in the lurch. In explanation of the action of the citizens of Fort Myers it should be said that the town is already so well supplied with laborers who have more time than money that the people in that neck of the woods are strongly prejudiced against "foreign pauper labor."²⁹

Two days later, the *Florida Times-Union* picked up on the story with a slightly different twist. Quoting an interview with Lee County resident F. A. Lane, the paper noted that "something of a reign of terror" was taking place with the "inevitable shotgun accompaniment." A second, unnamed source described the situation in similar fashion: "As near as I can make out, there is a regular organized movement on foot down there to keep out negro laborers. Eight prominent men are known to be at the bottom of the trouble, but the people who know who they are, and who want to put a stop to their lawlessness are not in a position to [do] anything about it but keep their mouths shut." The motive for this action, according to this source, was

²⁷ Ibid., November 17, 1895.

²⁸ Ibid., December 5, 1895.

²⁹ *Tampa Morning Tribune*, December 7, 1895. The authors would like to thank Gary Mormino for finding and sharing this source with us.

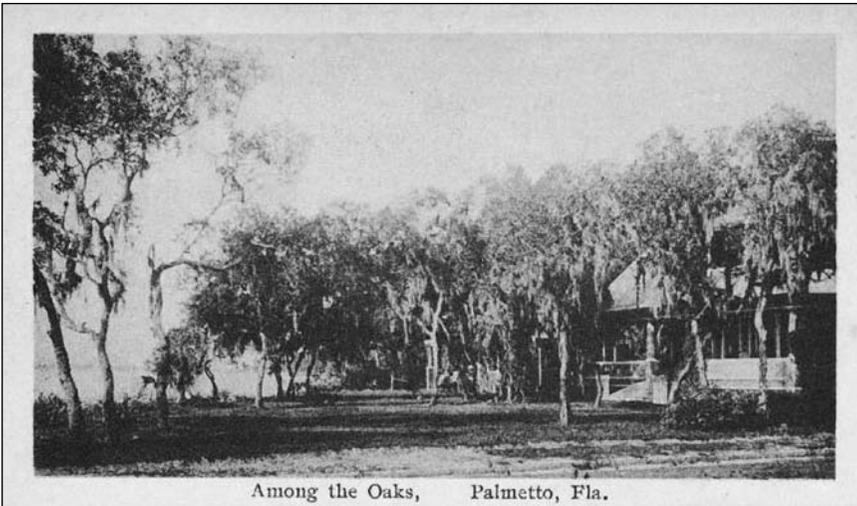
to keep Lee County away from citrus growing. The freeze had not affected the crop there, and many from the ruined area, especially Citra, were trying to speculate in Lee County land; if they were successful in shipping out the crop, then others would be attracted to the area, and the existing power structure would be threatened. In another attempt to drive out the pickers, a camp of orange pickers, allegedly housed in an old homestead, had thirty-eight rounds fired into it in.³⁰ The struggle here indicates that there was much more than simple racial prejudice behind the move to rid Lee County of African American laborers.

The crowning reportage of this incident came with the headlines in the *New York Times* on December 10, 1895. The main headline read: "War Against Florida Negroes," with the subtitle continuing: "Twelve Drowned While Fleeing from Their Persecutors—Alleged Conspiracy Against Owners of Cotton Groves." Aside from the "cotton groves" miscue, the article also quoted Mr. Lane, who reiterated that "the camps of orange pickers have been fired into frequently recently." But the drowning of blacks was not reported in the Florida papers. According to the *Times* source(s): "The negroes say they were not allowed to get anything to eat, and as the guards were firing at all times they feared they would be killed. Twelve negroes, in their terror, jumped into the river, and, it is thought, were drowned. The negroes brought back circulars which the whites of Lee County have issued warning the negroes to keep away." Reporting in a vein similar to the *Florida Times-Union*, the New York paper referenced a conspiracy to prevent the picking of oranges so the owners would have to abandon them and the conspirators would then get the land cheaply.³¹ The idea of a conspiracy of landowners appears to be a valid explanation for the intimidation of African American workers in the context of the day; however, the fact that white workers were allowed to land, pick oranges, and go about unmolested flies in the face of this "logic." Blatant racism and economic competition would better explain the actions of the "prominent citizens" of Lee County, primarily because they had an alleged surplus of labor on hand. Whether there was a conspiracy afoot is open to debate; however, the actions against the African American laborers aboard the *Lawrence* speak volumes about the racial attitudes of the perpetrators.

In the spring of the following year, 1896, conditions on the citrus- and truck-farming frontier appeared to be promising a new and abundant harvest. In April of that year, Henry B. Plant and colleagues took a cruise up the Manatee River, passed Braidentown (Bradenton), Manatee, and Palmetto. It was described by the *Jacksonville Citizen* in the following glowing terms: "The Manatee region of Florida is indeed a fairyland. A trip down Tampa Bay to the mouth of the Manatee River and up that pretty stream is like a jaunt in the land where Arcadian and Utopian visions dwell." It further reported that, "that part of Florida bears no sign whatever of any disastrous freeze a year ago." The Plant Line and the growers, according to this report, could look forward to a good season in 1896.

³⁰ *Florida Times-Union*, December 9, 1895.

³¹ *New York Times*, December 10, 1895.



Among the Oaks, Palmetto, Fla.

Tampa Bay History Center Collection

The violence that struck the town of Palmetto, on the northern banks of the Manatee River, was in stark contrast to the Jacksonville Citizen's cheery description of the area as a "fairyland."

Once again, the dreams of a peaceful season were destroyed by the uprising of alleged White Caps and others. On May 17, 1896, a headline in the *Florida Times-Union* read: "The Negroes Terrorized: An Ugly State of Affairs in Manatee County: Whitecaps Post Warnings." The subheading noted that the "Laborers Are Rapidly Leaving." An attempted arrest of one Jack Trice and others in the alleged shooting of three whites was the stated cause of the disturbance. However, even the newspaper was getting wise to this deception and reported: "It is now said a number of white men have taken advantage of the affair as a pretext to run the negroes out of the place. They have been going around to different places notifying the negroes to leave, or take the consequences." The timing, as in the incidents in Fort Myers and elsewhere, could not have been worse for the growers, who were in the midst of the harvest. As the *Times-Union* observed: "The shipping season is at its height and the loss will be very heavy to the growers on account of their being unable to hire help to gather their crops." Again, guns were fired into the houses of the African American laborers, and some, including one on the mayor of Palmetto's own property, had their homes burned and everything destroyed. The Sunday report noted that the reign of terror had been ongoing since the previous Wednesday and that "nearly all of the negroes had left the vicinity." And, once again, there were reports, all unconfirmed by the paper, of deaths from the violence. The hardest-hit firm, the Manatee Lemon Company, was notified that if it attempted to hire any African Americans, it would suffer the consequences. Its manager, Mr. C. L. Harvey, had his life threatened. Despite the protest of the "best element of Palmetto," the strife continued.³²

³² *Florida Times-Union*, May 17, 1896.

The local *Manatee River Journal* responded to this outbreak of negative news with editorials and reporting of its own. No one, of any race, it maintained, had been killed in Palmetto, despite the reports appearing in the Tampa papers. It heatedly decried the “Race War” charges of the other newspapers across the state and nation. It quoted Dr. John C. Pelot, one of the area’s most respected leaders, as writing to Governor Mitchell and informing him of the truth of the matter. Pelot did, however, admit to some signs being posted, two or three cabins being burned (for allegedly hiding Trice or his accomplices), and the fact that nearly twenty-eight African Americans had left Palmetto. Yet, the newspaper was steadily maintained that no one was killed, that Negroes were returning to work unmolested, and that few actually resided on the north side of the river. The negative image was totally unwarranted, according to the *Manatee River Journal*.³³ Yet, even the staunchest defender of the local actions had to admit that intimidation was being employed to frighten off African American workers. One must continue to ask, Why?

Almost every study of the postwar South and race relations has concentrated on either economic growth, peonage/sharecropping, or lynchings. What has been lacking is a study of violence unrelated to lynching and its causes. We believe that the evidence presented above shows that such a study is needed in Florida and the rest of the South. However, we would caution that Florida is different.

In the 1890s, Florida experienced a very large increase in African American population, whereas the rest of the South, excluding Texas, saw a decline in this segment of the population. Florida also was undergoing a tremendous transformation in its transportation system, a phosphate “boom,” a rapid growth in citrus- and truck farming, an explosion in the yellow pine and cypress timber industry, a shifting of resources to the developing tourist industry, and an opening up of vast new acreages through drainage and development. Yet, at the same time, citrus- and truck farming suffered a dramatic freeze which displaced thousands of workers and family grove owners.

The Panic of 1893 shook some of the financial basis of the state’s growth and caused many to lose their farms and some of the railroads to fail. A key indicator of the severity of the panic and freezes upon the state was the average annual income for Florida’s laboring masses. As economist William Stronge has pointed out in his recent volume on Florida’s economic growth since the Civil War: “The average annual labor income in Florida was \$119.72, the lowest of any state or territory. Florida’s average labor income was less than half the level in the country as a whole and just over 70 percent of the level in the other South Atlantic States. The low Florida level reflected the capital losses farmers suffered when the value of their farms declined.”³⁴ In some cases, the income simply disappeared. Added into this mixture was the immigration

³³ See the *Manatee River Journal* for May 21 and 28, 1895. The editorial pages were filled with this type of defense.

³⁴ William B. Stronge, *Sunshine Economy: An Economic History of Florida since the Civil War* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2008), 65.

of thousands of African Americans, Cubans, Italians, and others who took jobs like citrus and vegetable picking, tie-cutting and lumbering to establish a foothold in their new residence. These jobs, the fall-back employment of many affected by the severe economic dislocations of the 1890s, were the source of some of the violence registered above. As the jobs “created” by the Spanish-American War were of short-term duration, the social strain of having black, armed soldiers in their midst added greatly to the social and economic dislocations of the day. The economic competition of these diverse elements in the strained conditions of the times brought out some of the more violent responses of the age. More research into these causes of racial violence must be done before we can present an evenhanded picture of the Gilded Age in Florida and the South.