

Inventing the Past: The Representation of Florida in *Picturesque America*

Elizabeth B. Heuer

The nineteenth-century perception of Florida as a lush, tropical paradise was constructed through numerous fictional and nonfictional pictorial and verbal accounts. This vision—fueled by associations with the biblical garden of Eden and the Classical Elysian fields, its indigenous peoples frozen into perpetual and blissful Golden Age—was intended to entice settlers to colonize the region. Similar themes run through noted eighteenth-century botanist William Bartram's accounts of Florida in his *Travels of William Bartram* (1773), while Florida was described by one of its most famous nineteenth-century residents, Harriet Beecher Stowe, as "the sweetest paradise God ever made."¹ During the second half of the nineteenth century, a number of artist-tourists, attracted by the mild winters and resorts, made readily accessible by new railroad lines, perpetuated the notion of Florida as an edenic paradise of palms, tropical foliage, serene rivers, and white sandy beaches.

At mid-century, a landmark publication, *Picturesque America*, presented a pictorial collection of the nation's picturesque landmarks and localities, appealing to armchair travelers and creating a composite image of national reconciliation and resurgent pride in post Civil War America. Scholars have invariably discussed the representations of Florida contained within as consistent with the paradisaical view outlined above. This is true of the only comprehensive studies devoted to this publication: Allen L. Ramsier's *Picturesque America: Packaging America for Popular Consumption* (1985) and Sue Rainey's *Creating Picturesque America: Monument to the Natural and Cultural Landscape* (1994). Each argues that all the illustrations featured within its pages are representative of European conventions of the *picturesque*, as theorized in the many published essays on the topic penned by the eighteenth-century British artist and theologian William Gilpin.

However, in contrast to Ramsier and Rainey, I will argue here that a more critical analysis of the imagery reveals a new vision of Florida, an inhospitable land of death and decay, as seen in *A Florida Swamp* (Figure 1). Further, I will argue that the editors and publishers of *Picturesque America* intended to present a hierarchical view of the country, with an implicit ordering of the land into regions in various stages of social and economic development, consistent with popular theories

of social evolution. Finally, I will demonstrate that the unflattering portrayal of Florida, as largely populated by poverty-stricken, racial "others" unable to govern themselves wisely, was consistent with post-war representations of the South more generally. Cynically, it denies the existence of Florida's scenic beauty and fashionable watering holes, the very basis of picturesque tourism.

Picturesque America was one of the nineteenth-century's most popular and important publications. In its final bound form containing more than 900 wood engravings and 50 steel engravings, this multi-volume text was conceived of as an art object itself and as a monument to American nationalism, permitting readers virtual travel to American locales without venturing beyond the comfort of their Victorian parlors. Originating as a magazine series in *Appleton's Journal*, it was later serialized as a subscription book and published in bimonthly parts from 1872 to 1874 by D. Appleton & Co. The series was advertised by *Appleton's Journal* as "one of the most valuable pictorial series ever issued of American localities."²

Editor-in-chief, Oliver Bell Bunce led a team of twenty-eight staff writers and thirteen artists. The name of poet and Hudson River School advocate William Cullen Bryant was added as Editor in order to increase the series' appeal.³ Harry Fenn, who illustrated twenty-five of the sixty-five articles, was the first artist commissioned to travel the United States and gather sketches for the work. *Picturesque America* became an unprecedented success; nearly one million subscriptions were sold, satisfying a nation hungry for a comprehensive representation of American identity.⁴ The resulting publication was a constructed vision of greenery, church steeples and smoke stacks that signaled a fictitious harmony of pristine wilderness, industrial progress and middle-class morality, thus representing the nation as a blend of urban sophistication and natural wonder.

Florida was the first locality to be featured. "St. John's and Ocklawaha Rivers, Florida," published in *Appleton's Journal* on November 12, 1870, is a pictorial essay with illustrations by Harry Fenn and accompanying text by Thomas Bangs Thorpe. The following month, *Appleton's Journal* published a second installment featuring St. Augustine, Palatka, Picolata and Anastasia Island. Both essays, with minor modifications,

¹ Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Palmetto Leaves* (Gainesville: U of Florida P, 1968) 18.

² *Appleton's Journal* Nov. 1870, 620.

³ Sue Rainey, *Creating Picturesque America: Monument to the Natural and Cultural Landscape* (Nashville: Vanderbilt UP, 1994) 46.

⁴ Rainey 274.

were later included in the first bound volume of the *Picturesque America*.

Picturesque America, unique in its combination of literary and pictorial travel accounts, offered readers a strikingly unusual vision of Florida. *Scene in St. Augustine—the Date Palm* (Figure 2), focuses upon the palm tree, an established symbol of the Florida landscape. However, the environment that encompasses this palm is far removed from the lush, tropical habitat one would expect. Instead, Fenn has represented the palm surrounded by a dilapidated garden that is strewn with evidence of social entropy.

Implicit in the representations of Florida are popular notions of social evolution. During the nineteenth century, theories on evolution were affecting American perceptions of ethnic, racial, and class differences. Until now, the participation of *Picturesque America* in the discourse on evolution has remained unexamined.⁵ However, social evolutionary theory played an important role in regards to the overall mission and interests of D. Appleton & Co. Before assignment as editor of the *Picturesque America* series, Bunce was the assistant to Edward Livingston Youmans, Science Editor of *Appleton's Journal*, whose own scholarship focused on evolutionary theory. Although not an original thinker, he has been called “the most fervent admirer and popularizer of Charles Darwin and Herbert Spencer in early America.”⁶ Under Youman's guidance, *Appleton's Journal* became the American publisher of Darwin and Spencer. The firm had great success in 1860 with the first American edition of Darwin's *Origin of Species*. In 1871, it published Darwin's *Descent of Man*, a work that was so popular that it was more widely discussed than the most popular novels. D. Appleton & Co. also published Herbert Spencer's theories of social evolution, including his *Education* (1860) and *First Principles*, the first volume of his *Synthetic Philosophy* (1864).

Despite these emphases, scholars have neglected to consider popular theories of evolution on the publication of the *Picturesque America* series. Yet, Appleton's organization of the publication suggests an agenda to construct and organize American society into an evolutionary framework providing Americans with a vision of where the nation had been and where it was headed. This deliberate “ordering” of the country was part of a larger global paradigm that situated the United States at the evolutionary apex. This notion is evidenced by the fact that the publication of *Picturesque America* was followed in succession by *Picturesque Europe*, and *Picturesque Holy Land*. This established a pictorial collective that, taken on whole, clearly traces the emergence and entire evolution of Western culture from the Pre-Christian Mediterranean, through the rise and decline of Europe, to America's perceived ascension towards a utopian democratic society.

In representing the United States' place within this evolutionary

paradigm, *Picturesque America* organized the South, Northeast and West into evolutionary metaphors of the past, present and future played out economically according to relative works of industrial development. This portrayal of America was intended to appeal specifically to a Northeastern audience since this vision reflects a self-satisfying representation of this geographic region as the epitome of ideal, industrialized civilization, as seen in *City of New York from Brooklyn Heights* (Figure 3). In contrast, the relatively newer cities of the Mid-West offered Americans a vision of the future, wherein cities, such as *Cincinnati, View from the Carlisle Hotel* (Figure 4), represent the fulfillment of the American prophecy of Manifest Destiny. Other images of the West, including *Yosemite: Cathedral Spires* (Figure 5), offer a view of America's celebrated natural landmarks while simultaneously highlighting the wealth of natural resources and the seemingly limitless expanse of land. The South, as I will demonstrate, remained pre-industrial, evidently unable to evolve socially or culturally. Such a depiction justifies Northern intervention in and reform of the South, politically and economically, in post Civil War America.

Previous scholarship has argued that *Picturesque America* sought to convey a harmonious vision of reconciliation between the North and South. However, this interpretation fails to account for the underlying attitudes of Northern superiority that are evident in these illustrations. Rather than focusing on the industrial and civic progress of Southern reconstruction in cities such as Jacksonville, Florida, or Atlanta, Georgia, Fenn and Thorpe offer selected visions of the South, including *A Road-side Scene near Charleston* (Figure 6), which in their contrast to illustrations of the Northeast reinforce the social and cultural progress of the North while promoting the “primitive” society of the South. In accounting for this reductive portrayal, it is important to note that while Thorpe lived most of his adult life in the South, he was born in the North, and during the Civil War, served as a Colonel in the Union army. These political affiliations clearly appear to have had an effect on how he and Fenn represented the South to America.

Fenn's pictorial essays of Florida thus act as a metaphor for America's pre-industrial past, itself partitioned into three eras: the pre-historical, characterized by allusions to an edenic paradise; the colonial with references to European discovery and occupation, and the recent ante-bellum period.

The pre-historic past is suggested in the first plate of the *Picturesque America* series, *Mouth of the St. John's River—Looking in* (Figure 7), in which Fenn represents a desolate view of a sand bar rising from the ocean. The beach features the skeletal remains of an alligator and is populated by palm trees and birds. In his accompanying text, Thorpe writes, “The time was when Florida was an immense sand-bar...as barren as can be conceived, until through the course of ages seeds

⁵ Rainey 10. In discussion about the D. Appleton and Co. publisher, Rainey notes the *Appleton's* interest in promoting social evolutionary theorists in accord with the company's mission to educate America.

⁶ Mike Hawkins, *Social Darwinism in European and American Thought 1860-1945* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1997) 106.

were carried to its shores...by the sea and wind...clothing it in luxuriant vegetation.”⁷ Blending allusions to biblical creation and theories of evolution, this pictorial and verbal narrative suggests an image of Florida as a symbol of the dawn of time. However, sand offers few of the nutrients of the soil supporting agriculture to the North, and Thorpe cynically undecors the fiction of this image, whose “main features illustrate the absurdity of the common notion that landscapes of tropical and semi-tropical latitudes are superior in luxuriance of vegetable production to those of the temperate zones.”⁸

Fenn’s *Waiting for Decomposition* (Figure 8) and its pendant *A Florida Swamp* are fantastic representations of a North Florida swamp. In *A Florida Swamp* Fenn focuses upon the dense foliage and wildlife that inhabit the dark recesses. These shallow waters appear to ripple with the movement of snakes, alligators and exotic water fowl, who stalk the murky waters for frogs and fish. The thick vegetation and protruding cypress knees render the alcove inaccessible for exploration. *Waiting for Decomposition* features the body of a dead alligator floating in the swamp waters. Overhead buzzards attracted by the carrion gather ominously in a dead cypress tree. While these scenes illustrate Florida’s evolution from a barren sandbar to a primordial jungle, inhabited by lower animal species, such as snakes, alligators and turtles, these scenes simultaneously suggest entropy. The nightmarish quality of this swamp, filled with dead vegetation and writhing with serpents, offers a new version of post Civil War Florida. Fenn’s images are neither inviting nor picturesque, but, in their reference to death and decay denote that something has gone awry in this garden of Eden.

Published in the second edition of the *Picturesque America* series, illustrations such as *St. Mark’s Castle* (Figure 9) recall the era of European discovery and occupation. Thorpe’s narrative for “St. Augustine, Florida” outlines the history of St. Augustine, making constant parallels between it and the old towns of Spain and Italy.⁹ By focusing upon the ruins of European landmarks and noting the community of St. Augustine, cited as the oldest European settlement in the United States, Fenn provides a visual transition between Europe and America.

In this regard, Florida is established as the site of the development and demise of European culture in America.

These images of Florida as a crumbling civilization also allude to the demise of the more recent ante-bellum era. Scenes of decrepit European architecture provide a stark contrast to those of the modern industrialized North and prosperous Midwest.

Unlike the sophisticated figures featured in images of the North East, the population of the Southern states is portrayed as consisting of recently freed slaves. Images of the South feature stereotypes of African Americans as poverty-stricken, inhabitants of a un-modernized society deny the true ethnic diversity of the South. It was, however, the newly-freed African American who was now symbolic of the South during the turbulent years of Reconstruction. In the context of popular social evolutionary thought, African Americans were perceived to be on the lowest rung of the evolutionary scale. The Florida Crackers ran a close second, perceived by Northerners as the lowest stages of Southern white civilization. Like the Native Americans, who were invisible in *Picturesque America* as obstacles to Mid-Western industrial development, these peoples were social-evolutionary children in need of paternal guidance and supervision. In the visual rhetoric of reformism beginning to take form in the 1870s, the South was the implicit “before” to the North’s “after.”

In conclusion, these unorthodox images of Florida challenge popular notions of Florida as a lush, topical paradise. In the subsequent publication of *Picturesque America*, titled *The Land We Live*, Florida is represented as a re-civilized Eden thanks to Northern intervention and reform (Figure 10). However, *Picturesque America*’s original construction of Florida as a vision of death, decay and cultural stagnation is representative of opportunistic Northern attitudes towards the South. Florida and the South were thus metaphors of a past that American culture had left behind. I suggest that within these leather bound books is a not-so-subtly manipulated representation of American cultural identity that is clearly conceived to “order” America geographically and culturally into a constructed paradigm of evolutionary ascension in order to promote American, especially Northern, attitudes of self-identity.

Florida State University

⁷ “St. Johns and Ocklawaha Rivers, Florida,” *Appleton’s Journal*, 186.

⁹ “St. Augustine, Florida,” *Appleton’s Journal*, 189.

⁸ “St. Johns and Ocklawaha Rivers, Florida,” *Appleton’s Journal*, 186.



Figure 1. *A Florida Swamp*, 1874, wood engraving by F.W. Quartley after drawing by Harry Fenn, 8 3/16 x 5 1/8 inches, *Picturesque America*, vol. I.



Figure 2. *Scene in St. Augustine—The Date Palm*, 1874, wood engraving by Harley after drawing by Harry Fenn, 8 3/16 x 5 1/8 inches, *Picturesque America*, vol. I.



Figure 3. *City of New York from Brooklyn Heights*, 1874, steel engraving by G.R. Hall after drawing by A.C. Warren, 5 5/16 x 9 1/2 inches, *Picturesque America*, vol. II.

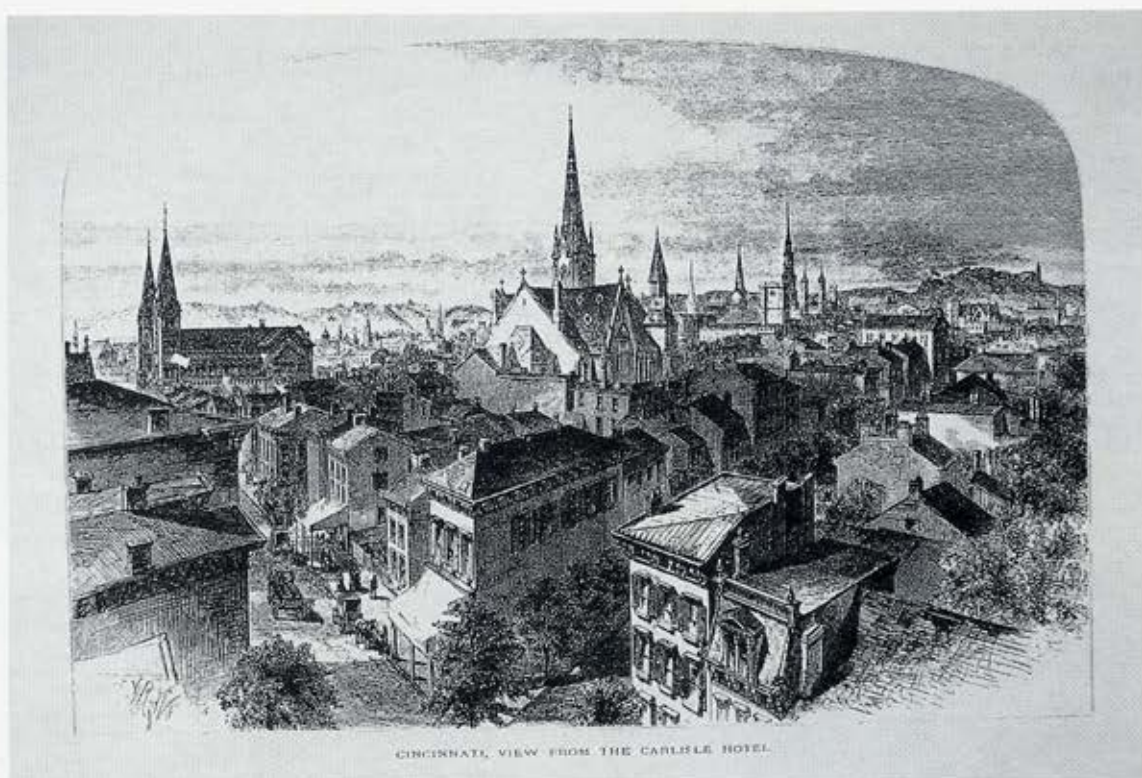


Figure 4. *Cincinnati, View from the Carlisle Hotel*, 1874, wood engraving by Philip Meeder and F.Y. Chubb after drawing by A.R. Waud, 7½ x 6 3/8 inches, *Picturesque America*, vol. II.

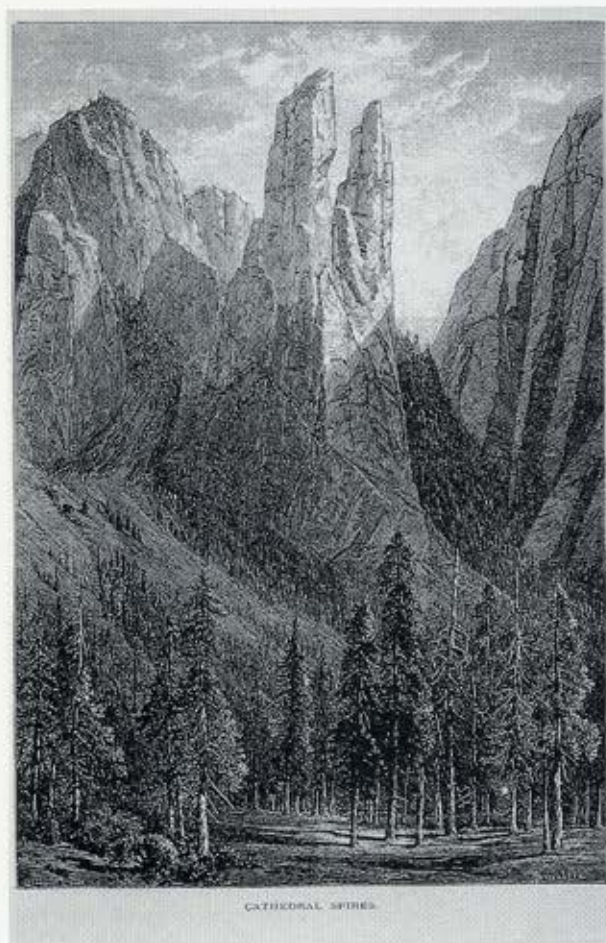


Figure 6. *A Roadside Scene near Charleston*, July 1871, wood engraving by A. Bobbet after drawing by Harry Fenn, 5 15/16 x 6 7/16 inches, *Appleton's Journal*, page 1.

Figure 5. *Yosemite: Cathedral Spires*, 1874, wood engraving by James David Smillie, 8 15/16 x 6 1/4 inches, *Picturesque America*, vol. II.



Figure 7. *Mouth of the St. Johns River Lookin-in*, November 1870, wood engraving by F.W. Quartley after drawing by Harry Fenn, $1\frac{1}{2} \times 4\frac{3}{4}$ inches, *Appleton's Journal*, page 1.



Figure 8. *Waiting for Decomposition*, 1874, wood engraving by F.W. Quartley after drawing by Harry Fenn, $8\frac{3}{16} \times 5\frac{1}{8}$ inches, *Picturesque America*, vol. I.



Figure 9. *Watch Tower, St. Mark Castle*, 1874, wood engraving after Harry Fenn Drawing, 6½ x 5 inches, *Picturesque America*, vol. I.



Figure 10. *A Florida Orange-Grove*, 1886, wood engraving, 5 x 3 ½ inches, *Picturesque America*.