

"THE HEALTHIEST PART OF FLORIDA . . ."

*An Eyewitness Account of New River,
Reprinted from the St. Augustine News, December 11, 1840*

As everything connected with Florida is a subject of interest to its residents, as well as being anxiously sought for by persons abroad, we publish the following extract of a letter, written several years since, in part descriptive of New River and the country of South Florida. It is customary with many persons to associate a barren and sterile soil with the name of our Territory; and, in lieu of investing it with a rich and fertile character, to see nothing but pine trees, sand cranes, and gopher holes. Even the beautiful name of Florida — synonymous with flowers, the aroma of whose bloom charge the air with fragrant odor — is lost to those dull sensibilities, and a peninsula capable of sustaining millions of inhabitants is wrote down as inhospitable in character, and offering no incentive to enterprise, or reward to industry.

"It is a small river running into the sea 20 miles to the North of Cape Florida Light, having four feet water on the bar; four miles from its outlet it branches off into four prongs, each of which, at the distance of six miles from their junction, are lost in what we term the *Everglades*, or inland sea of fresh water, the extent of which has as yet not been ascertained; Mr. [William] Cooley, who resides near the mouth of the inlet, attempted some time since to pass through them to Cape Florida. He was in them several days, lost for want of a *compass* to direct his course; there was a sufficient depth of water for a vessel of some size. I have examined them in this neighborhood, and I am told they preserve much the same appearance near 100 miles to the Southward of this. If they were properly examined, I think it would be discovered that they extend in a Westwardly direction through this peninsula, and is the source from whence flow all the rivers into the Gulph [Gulf of Mexico] from the opposite side of this peninsula; and I have no doubt but that an exploring party might pass through New River, and, by pursuing a Westwardly course, enter

into the Gulph, through Chatham Bay or some of the other rivers flowing into the Gulph to the Westward of this. I should suppose it well worth the attention of the Government to authorize a party for that purpose. It is much to be regretted that the lands in the neighborhood of New River are so little known. In my opinion upward of 10,000 acres of the richest kind of sugar lands might be obtained there, mostly high fresh water marsh, with an elevation of about four feet above common tides, they could be made *perfectly dry*, and have a soil of black or blue clay, from 2 to 3 feet deep. Raised, as I have been, in the lower part of South Carolina, I consider myself a good judge of such quality of lands, and I am confident that such lands as I have described could not be obtained at a less price than \$100 per acre, were they situated in Carolina. Independent of this species of lands, there are considerable bodies of high hammock of good quality; there are also large bodies of live oak, handy to a water carriage; the pine lands bordering

on these lands are high and well timbered, and would afford an inexhaustible range for cattle and hogs, and to all these advantages, I am warranted in asserting that it is *by far* the healthiest part of Florida I have yet seen. These lands are all as yet ungranted, and only require to be made known and they will in time become settled. As they lie in the same latitude with the Island of Abaco, one of the Bahama Islands, and as the cocoa-nut tree grows to great perfection near New River and in the woods in that neighborhood, I am induced to believe that coffee might be cultivated there with advantage; for it is said that 'any climate is adapted to the cultivation of coffee on which the cocoa-nut tree can be raised, without injury from frost;' for my part I have seen nothing like frost since I removed here in 1825. Knowing the interest which you take in the prosperity of this Territory, I have ventured to trespass on your time and patience by giving you a full description of a valuable section of our country, hitherto little known."

The brief article reprinted here originally appeared under the title "New River & c." in the *St. Augustine News* in the midst of the Second Seminole War. As the introductory paragraph states, it was written "several years" prior to its publication, almost certainly before the war erupted, since it mentions William Cooley's residence on the river. Somewhat perplexingly, that residence is given "near the mouth of the inlet," rather than at the Sailboat Bend site of Cooley's plantation.

Internal evidence indicates that the anonymous author, a South Carolinian who moved to the region in 1825, was Richard Fitzpatrick, who acquired the Frankee Lewis Donation property on New River in 1830 and established plantations both there and in the Miami area. Arguably south Florida's most prominent citizen during the 1830s, Fitzpatrick served as president of the territory's legislative council in 1836 and was largely responsible for the creation of Dade County that year. His remarkable visions for the lower peninsula, including Everglades drainage and extensive cultivation of sugar, livestock, and tropical plants, is well documented in a number of sources and is reflected in the sentiments expressed in this article.