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# *The Early Years of* **THE EAST COAST CANAL**

*Originally printed as*

**“East Coast Canal To Be Bought by  
Government For Much Less Than It  
Has Cost to Build,”**

*in The Weekly Miami Metropolis, Friday, November 27, 1914, p.5*

STUART, Fla., Nov. 24—That the government could acquire the longest inland waterway in the world for \$2,000,000 which cost its present owner \$3,541,216 to construct was the declaration of C. C. Chillingsworth after a review of the history of the East Coast canal at a convention of the East Coast Canal association assembled here. He made this statement after conversing with many members of the Florida Coast Line Canal and Transportation Company which built and now owns the canal.

The use of the canal not only for commercial purposes but also for purposes of national defence [sic.] in time of war was urged by Mr. Chillings-

worth as reasons for the taking over of the canal by the government. The history of the canal was related by him as follows:

“During its career of thirty-three years — the average generation of mankind — the Florida Coast Line Canal and Transportation company has certainly experienced as many vicissitudes as the average man, but it has finally lived to see its plan of constructing an inland waterway along the east coast of Florida carried to a successful completion.

The struggles, the hardships, the heartbreaks, the disappointments, and the despair of its owners have never been and never will be recorded, but let

us honor the men who have fought the fight to a finish and who truly deserve the praise of all men for the good work they have done.

In 1879, the legislature of Florida passed an act granting to any canal company incorporated under the general laws of the state, the alternate sections of swamp and of overflowed lands lying on either side of any canal it might construct, upon certain conditions mentioned in the act.

To obtain the benefit of this act, the Florida Coast Line and Transportation company was chartered under the general laws of Florida on June 24, 1881. The proposition was to construct an inland waterway between the St.

*Southern Florida owes much of its reputation as a pleasure boating center to the presence of the Intracoastal Waterway, a long, sheltered channel that follows the Atlantic and Gulf coasts for over 3,000 miles between Massachusetts and Texas. Although this waterway system was not completed until 1937, many segments of the route have a much longer history. Among these is the section along Florida's Atlantic coast, formerly known as the Florida East Coast Canal.*

*Charles Curtis Chillingsworth, who prepared the accompanying history of the canal in 1914 as an address to the East Coast Canal Association, was a native of Liverpool, New York, who came to Florida to practice law in 1891. He settled in West Palm Beach, where he was a prominent attorney and judge until his death in 1936. His history of the canal underscores the widespread concern,*

*felt as early as 1914, that the United States would become involved in World War I, and urges government acquisition of the canal as a defense measure.*

*Although the United States entered the war in 1917, the canal remained in private hands for an additional twelve years. Mounting maintenance costs drove the canal company into receivership in 1923, and two years later, the Rhode Island Hospital Trust Company sold it to Palm Beach County real estate developer Harry S. Kelsey. Hurt financially by the collapse of the Florida real estate boom, Kelsey in turn deeded the canal to the United States government in 1929 for inclusion in the Intracoastal Waterway system. The Florida east coast section of the Intracoastal, re-dredged to a depth of eight feet and a channel width of 100 feet, was completed in 1935.*



Natural waterways along the southeast Florida coast as they appeared in 1889. This series of inlets, rivers, and lakes was connected to form the Florida East Coast Canal, today's Intracoastal Waterway.

Johns river and Biscayne bay, using the natural waterways wherever possible and connecting these natural waterways with links of a canal. The original plan was to dig a canal three feet deep and thirty feet wide at the bottom. Mr. Geo. L. Bradley, a capitalist of Providence, Rhode Island, was the prime mover in this enterprise, and from the date of its inception until his death he was its prime financial backer.

#### *Digging Started*

Actual digging was started in 1883 on the canal between St. Augustine and Daytona, and work was done on this canal in 1885, 1902, 1903, 1905, 1906, 1911, and 1913. This canal is the longest on the entire waterway, being thirty-six miles in length.

The dredging between Daytona and through the Haulover canal, which

connects the Mosquito lagoon and the Indian river, was done at various times during the presidency of Mr. George L. Bradley from 1900 to 1906. This work was not completed until this year, and the total mileage excavated was seven miles.

The dredging from the Haulover canal through the Indian river to Hobe sound was done in 1886, 1889, and 1893, and the total distance dredged was six miles.

In 1893 the legislature consented that the Canal company might surrender and relinquish to the United States government a portion of its waterway through the Indian river. An agreement was made between the government and the Canal company to turn over to the government that portion of the waterway, through the Indian river between Goat Creek and the Jupiter inlet and the government subsequently dredged two and one-half miles within this reach. The Canal company has often been unjustly charged with neglecting to maintain this waterway through the Indian River, as it has not been generally known that the sole responsibility for this work during the past twenty-one years has been upon the government.

The dredging from Hobe sound to Lake Worth was done in 1891, 1895 and 1897 and covered a total distance of eleven and one-half miles. Going further south, we find that the dredging from Lake Worth to New River inlet was done in 1893, 1894, 1895 and 1896, making a total of thirty-two miles. The dredging from the New River inlet to Miami was begun in 1896 and was finished in this year, 1914.

#### *Enormous Excavation*

This covers the entire distance from St. Augustine south to a point in Biscayne bay. The dredging between the St. Johns River and St. Augustine was done in 1909, 1910, and 1911, and covered a distance of twenty-one miles. It is impossible to give the yardage for each separate canal by itself, but it is known that the total yardage excavated between St. Augustine and Biscayne Bay was 9,720,771 cubic yards. The yardage between St. Augustine and the St. Johns River was 3,194,960 cubic yards, making total excavation by the Canal company of 12,915,731 cubic yards. The total yardage was largely increased by the Act of the Legislature of 1889 which required that the canal should not be less than fifty feet wide at the bottom and that it should not have less than five feet of water at mean low tide for the entire distance between St. Augustine and Biscayne bay.

The total number of miles of canal dug was one hundred twenty-nine and

one-half miles in various portions of the canal between the St. Johns River, the Matanzas River, the Halifax River, the Indian River, Lake Worth, the Hillsboro River, New River, Dumfundling [sic.] Bay and Biscayne Bay. This comprises what is probably the longest coastal inland waterway in the world:

A narrative of the difficulties which this Canal company has encountered during the thirty-three years of its existence would fill a good-sized volume. Time and again it has been compelled to stop work because of financial difficulties, and it has appeared more than once as though the dredging would never be carried through to completion. The original promoter, Mr. George L. Bradley, kept on advancing funds until practically the whole of his large fortune was invested in the stocks and bonds of the Canal company and he died leaving little else than his interest in this company. At that time, large grants of land had been withheld by the state and the future of the canal was problematical. Fortunately the Rhode Island Hospital Trust company was made the executor under Mr. Bradley's will and it is owing to the liberal and repeated advances made by this Trust company that the canal was ever finished. The total cost of the canal, including incidental expenses, to October 30, 1914, was \$3,541, 216.13.

#### *First Land Grant*

In 1885 the legislature of Florida by special act granted the Canal company 3,840 acres of land per mile for the entire distance from St. Augustine to Biscayne Bay inclusive of natural waterways. This grant was confirmed by the legislature of 1889 at the same time that it increased the size of the canal.

Through inability to raise funds, the burning of some of its dredges, the wrecking of others, and numerous other difficulties unnecessary now to relate, the progress in constructing the canal was painfully slow, and the legislature in 1897 granted an extension for the completion of the canal to June 1, 1898. In that year an extension for four years from June 1, 1899 to June 1, 1903 was granted. In 1903 a further extension to June 1, 1905 was granted. Meanwhile, a serious misunderstanding had arisen between the state and the Canal company, and litigation was started in June, 1904, to restrain the state from conveying to other parties lands which the Canal company justly believed should be granted to itself. This litigation dragged through the courts during the years 1904, 1905, and 1906. Finally as a result of long, drawn-out negotiations, a contract was entered into between the Trustees of the Internal Improvement

Fund and the Canal company on December 1, 1906, whereby the Canal company, upon paying the state \$50,000 in cash, received a further extension of five years from December 1, 1906 to December 1, 1911, in which to complete the canal. It was further agreed that upon completion of the canal it should receive as a final grant from the state, a total of 234,297.60 acres in addition to what it had previously received. At the signing of this contract, two deeds which should convey this land to the Canal company were placed in escrow in the hands of a banker in Jacksonville pending the completion of the canal. These deeds were delivered in 1912. But the troubles of the Canal company were not yet ended, and in April 1913, an additional sum of \$75,000 in cash was paid by the Canal company to the Trustees of the Internal Improvement Fund in final settlement of all claims which the state had against the Canal company. It was agreed that this sum should be expended under the direction of the Trustees of the Internal Improvement Fund in removing shoals, deepening and improving the canal in general and in making new cuts in certain places to avoid sharp turns in the waterway. A contract was awarded for this work, which is now completed.

#### *Thirteen Deeds to Land*

The Canal company has, beginning with July 3, 1883, and coming down to date, received thirteen deeds from the state of Florida granting to the company in the aggregate of 1,030,127.94 acres. Owing to its financial stress which has existed during a large share of its career, the Canal company sold this land from time to time at very low prices. For example, it sold the Boston Florida Atlantic Coast Land company 100,000 acres at \$1.00 an acre. The Canal company also made a donation of the Florida East Coast Railway company of 197,418.91 acres in 1895 and 1897. It has now sold practically all of its land and has nothing to show for the \$3,541,216.13 which it has expended, except its canal. If it could have arranged to hold the land which it received from the state until this time, the land would have been worth many millions of dollars and the Canal company would have been a financial success. As it stands today, in all probability, some sum between \$1,000,000 and \$2,000,000 will have been lost on this enterprise.

What threatened to be one of the severest blows ever aimed at the Canal company was the suit filed by the Florida East Coast Railway company against the Canal company and the Trustees of the Internal Improvement

Fund in 1910 to enjoin the Trustees of the Internal Improvement Fund from delivering the two deeds then held in escrow for the Canal company, which deeds would convey to the Canal company 234,297.60 acres upon the completion of the canal. The Railway company under an old grant fully believed that it was entitled to alternate sections of the identical land which was to be conveyed to the Canal company under those two deeds. This litigation dragged through 1910, 1911 and 1912, although it never reached the stage where any testimony was taken. Happily it was settled in 1912 by the Railway company accepting from the state land near the foot of the peninsula of Florida in lieu of land along the line of the canal.

#### *\$7,000 From Tolls*

In 1896, a toll chain was placed across the canal at Dania in Dade County and from that date until December, 1913, tolls were charged there as follows: For boats under fifty feet in length, 10 cents per foot. For boats from fifty to seventy-five feet in length, 15 cents per foot. For boats from seventy-five to one hundred feet in length, 20 cents per foot. And for boats from one hundred to one hundred twenty-five feet in length, 25 cents per foot. On December 12, 1913, the Trustees of the Internal Improvement Fund adopted a schedule of tolls covering the entire canal from Jacksonville to Miami. The total amount of tolls collected from January 1, 1896 to October 30, 1914, was only \$7,289.26.

Dr. John Westcott, one of the original promoters of the Canal company, was president of the company from its organization in 1881 until his death in 1888, when he was succeeded by Mr. John W. Denny, who served until 1893. During 1892, Mr. Henry M. Flagler worked out a plan for building a railroad along the east coast of Florida from St. Augustine as far south as West Palm Beach. It was supposed at that time that the Railway company and the Canal company had harmonious interests, and Mr. Flagler acquired a block of stock in the Canal company. From 1893 to 1896 Mr. Flagler acted as president of the Canal company. Mr. Geo. F. Miles, who was the engineer for the Canal company as well as director in the company for many years, was president from 1896 until March 15, 1900. On that date Mr. Geo. L. Bradley was elected president and he served until March 26, 1906. Mr. Geo. F. Miles was acting president from that date until March 12, 1907, when Mr. Frederick Amory was chosen as president, which office he has ably filled until this date. The other officers are: Mr. Stephen

O. Edwards, vice-president; Mr. A. H. Sawyer, secretary and treasurer; Mr. John W. Denny, assistant secretary; and Mr. George W. Gibbs, assistant treasurer.

Mr. Frederick Amory, Mr. Stephen O. Edwards, Mr. A. H. Sawyer, Mr. John W. Denny, Mr. Frank H. Swan, and Mr. Herbert J. Wells comprise the present board of directors of the company. Mr. Herbert J. Wells is president of the Rhode Island Hospital Trust company, the oldest trust company in New England, and it has been largely through his active assistance during many years that the Canal company has been able to keep its operations going.

#### *Great Value in War*

The East Coast Canal can be made not only of an inestimable value for transportation purposes, but in time of war it could also be of untold assistance to the state and the nation. In these days when the bloodiest war of history is being fought in continental Europe, it is interesting to recall an incident in which the East Coast Canal was of great value to our government in war time. During the Spanish-American war in 1898, the Secretary of War wished to send three mortar carriages to Key West. It negotiated with the Plant System for the transportation of these carriages by rail to Tampa and thence by ship to Key West, but the charges demanded were considered exorbitant. He asked the Canal company to make a bid for transporting these carriages from Titusville to Key West and the company made a bid, with the result that the three mortar carriages were transported by the inland waterway from Titusville to Key West for one-third of the sum asked by the Plant System on the west coast.

In case of a naval attack on our country, the Florida coast would be greatly exposed, as it has no fortifications and no harbors for the use of war vessels, and a canal along the coast would be of enormous value to the government and a very great protection to the state.

That the canal should be acquired by the government and deepened and widened to make it navigable for large vessels of commerce and of war, is the conclusion of every thoughtful person who has studied the subject. The present canal might possibly be purchased for about \$2,000,000, which is a great deal less than the \$3,641,216.13 it has cost its present owners.

As patriotic Floridians, let us vigorously champion the plan of governmental ownership of this canal, knowing well that we shall thereby serve our state and aid in the preservation of the nation."