

# THE FLORIDA FIBER COMPANY,

## DUNCAN U. FLETCHER and the MIDDLE RIVER ENTERPRISE

by Rodney E. Dillon, Jr. and Joe Knetsch

"Locate now, without waiting for the dredges to reclaim the Everglades. Present settlers are making BIG MONEY," proclaimed an advertisement for the "Progreso Tract" in the September 29, 1909 Special Everglades Edition of the *Miami Metropolis*.<sup>1</sup> South Florida was in the midst of a land boom as the State sold huge amounts of property to private developers to finance the Everglades drainage project and encourage individual drainage projects to feed into the main state canals then under construction. The Progreso advertisement, which went on to describe the ten-acre farm plots offered for sale on Middle River just north of Fort Lauderdale, closely resembled the other notices selling Everglades and adjoining coastal lands which crowded the pages of the newspaper. But, unlike most of the other real estate companies listed, the unusual name of the Jacksonville concern selling the Progreso tract--the Florida Fiber Company--recalls

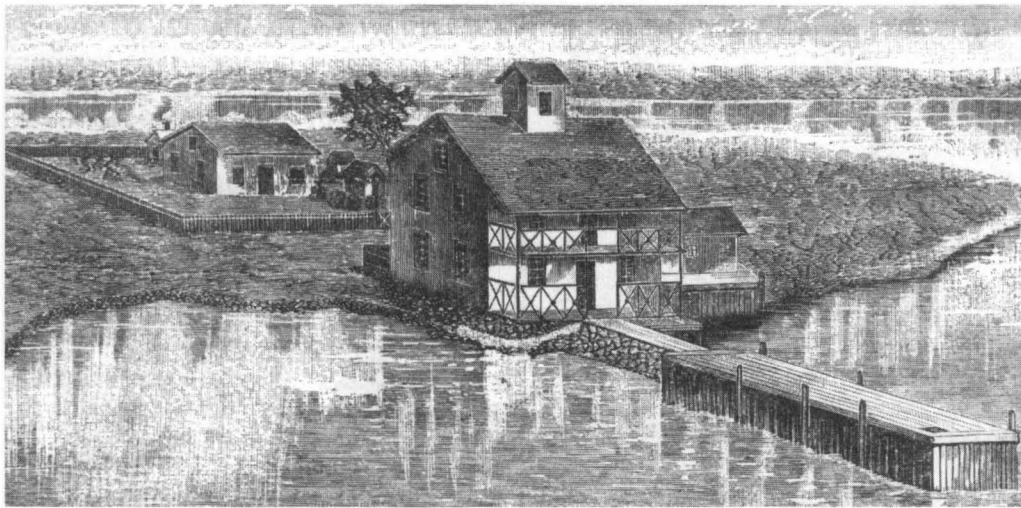
a unique enterprise which pre-dated the Everglades land boom by almost two decades.

As early as the end of the eighteenth century, a handful of visionaries had seen in the remote south Florida wilderness the potential for fertile cultivation and bustling commercial centers.<sup>2</sup> In the years immediately preceding the Second

Seminole War, agricultural innovators, most notably Richard Fitzpatrick and Dr. Henry Perrine, experimented with a wide variety of tropical fruits, vegetables, and other plants along Florida's lower east coast and in the Keys.<sup>3</sup> Dr. Perrine, physician, horticulturist, and former United States consul at Campeche, Mexico, established his home and

One of Broward County's most unique land and agricultural enterprises was the Middle River plantation of Jacksonville's Florida Fiber Company, which attempted the commercial production of sisal hemp in the early 1890s. While the existence of the sisal operation and the involvement of future U.S. Senator Duncan U. Fletcher are well known, this article focuses on the lesser-known aspect of the venture as part of a national movement promoting domestic fiber cultivation during the 1890s and on the varied uses of the property by the company after the hemp experiment failed.

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At left is Dr. Henry Perrine's house and dock at Indian Key; at right is the sisal plant, which Dr. Perrine introduced to south Florida (illustrations courtesy of the Historical Association of Southern Florida).

gardens at Indian Key, and a nursery for tropical plants at adjacent Lower Maticumbe Key. He also obtained a federal grant of one township on the mainland in today's south Dade County, where he hoped to develop a plantation and settlement.<sup>4</sup> Among the plants he imported from the Yucatan was the sisal or agave, a hemp fiber-producing relative of the cactus, which grows well in rocky, sandy soil but is particularly susceptible to frost.<sup>5</sup>

Although Dr. Perrine was killed in an Indian attack on his home at Indian Key in 1840, and the Seminole War ended his personal efforts to initiate large-scale agricultural enterprises in south Florida, the sisal plants he brought to the region flourished. Some were reportedly aided by soldiers stationed at Fort Dallas on the Miami River, who valued them as ornamentals and transported them to other military posts on the southern peninsula.<sup>6</sup> Charles Howe and other Perrine associates continued the doctor's efforts at the proposed land grant, and by 1845 had 320 acres under cultivation. Bahamian labor was imported to attend to the plants, but this effort was cut short by the Indian scare of 1849.<sup>7</sup>

The industry experienced greater success in the Bahamas, where English and Canadian capitalists established large plantations in the 1880s, reportedly obtaining over fifty schooner cargoes of wild plants from the southeast Florida

coast. In 1889, these British and Canadian interests purchased a 120,000 acre tract of government land in the Bahamas and were reaping an average of \$600,000 annually in fiber exports, a figure confidently predicted to multiply into the millions in the coming years. To encourage production, the colonial government offered growers a one cent per pound bounty on all fiber exports for the next four years.<sup>8</sup>

The Yucatan remained the chief source of sisal hemp throughout the nineteenth century. Production of the fiber comprised that region's chief industry, and eighty percent of the total production was exported to the United States by 1890.<sup>9</sup> Primarily used in manufacturing binding twine and cordage, and to a lesser degree rope, sisal was an important commodity to a nation rapidly becoming an industrial giant. During the 1880s, the value of sisal shipped to the United States from the Yucatan multiplied from \$1,800,000 to over \$5,000,000, while total sisal imports exceeded \$7,000,000.<sup>10</sup> The reliance on imports from Mexico, and to a lesser degree the British Bahamas and Spanish Cuba, coupled with tight Spanish control over the lucrative abaca or Manila hemp market in the Philippines, underscored the need to develop domestic fiber sources.<sup>11</sup> As a result, the United States Department of Agriculture in 1889 sent noted fiber authority Charles Richards Dodge to Florida

to begin a four-year survey of the state's fiber-producing plants. By the time Dodge's first report was published, the Florida Fiber Company had already put their plans for a south Florida plantation into motion.<sup>12</sup>

The fiber company was apparently the idea of Jacob R. Kuchler, owner of a Jacksonville plumbing, steam-fitting and pump company, and developer of a bone fertilizer factory in that city.<sup>13</sup> According to Kuchler's own account, a visit to the Yucatan in 1889 had shown him the enormous profits being made from sisal hemp and convinced him that Dr. Perrine's plan to cultivate the plant commercially in south Florida was feasible. As a result, Kuchler recalled, he contacted some of the city's "best businessmen," and was fortunate to attract the interest of a rising young attorney and Jacksonville City Council President, Duncan Upshaw Fletcher.<sup>14</sup>

Thirty-one years old in 1890, Fletcher had already demonstrated an interest in tropical and subtropical agriculture. In 1887, he had coordinated the efforts of Jacksonville and Duval County officials in planning the first annual Subtropical Exposition, showcasing the agricultural products of Florida and Latin America. The exposition, which opened in January 1888, was described as "brilliantly successful," and attracted an impressive array of dignitaries, including President

Grover Cleveland. More importantly, Fletcher maintained a keen interest in south Florida's vast, untapped real estate opportunities. Soon after the close of Reconstruction a decade earlier, the State's generous land policies had begun to attract investors seeking cheap land and a chance to profit by reclaiming it and constructing transportation routes to make it accessible. Corporations and individuals, including the Florida Coast Line Canal and Transportation Company, various railroads, Hamilton Disston, and the Florida Land and Mortgage Company, snapped up huge tracts of central and south Florida lands during the 1880s, both through purchases and state grants.<sup>15</sup>

On May 23, 1890, Edward C. Patterson, a Jacksonville bookkeeper acting as secretary for the businessmen interested in the fiber project, made an initial request to the state land office for "any land for sale on or near the east coast below Lake Worth or in the Keys." Patterson expressed special interest in land on

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*Duncan U. Fletcher*  
Attorneys and Counsellors-at-Law.  
Jacksonville, Fla.  
D. U. Fletcher  
John W. Wombwell

Office 13, 14, 15 Low Building  
Hon. L. B. Wombwell, Commr. of  
Jacksonville, Fla. Sept. 13 - 1890

Dear Sir: I am indebted for your favor of 11<sup>th</sup> -  
in regard to land in 750 + 49. I have written  
Pres. of Canal Co. who has been in a position  
at the same time as at 150 and he states he did not  
know of any land from state to us. What kind  
of process would you be going through with in  
case the agreed on land prices from the Canal  
Co. get it decided from various? Makes the order  
the Pres. to carry to us on payment of fixed price  
be sufficient?  
Yours Truly, D. U. Fletcher

**One of Duncan U. Fletcher's letters to Agricultural Commissioner Wombwell inquiring about land available for the sisal venture (courtesy of the Florida State Archives).**

New River "or anywhere on Biscayne Bay," asking in a postscript when the Florida Coast Line Canal and Transportation Company would be able to sell their lands.<sup>16</sup> On June 10,

Patterson wrote to Florida Agricultural Commissioner L. B. Wombwell, specifically mentioning the sisal enterprise. The Commissioner reassured him that obtaining usable land would not be difficult, since according to "experts from the Yucatan" all south Florida, especially the east coast, was well suited to sisal cultivation. Wombwell added that the venture should be "one of the most handsome paying enterprises ever inaugurated in this State."<sup>17</sup>

In the meantime, Fletcher, Patterson, and their associates had already discussed land purchases with the Florida Coast Line Canal and Transportation Company. Patterson notified Wombwell on July 2 that John Denny, president of the canal company, was "willing and anxious" to deed his group property, but that the State Land Department would have to select the land, preferably a section on Biscayne Bay, since the State had not yet transferred it to the canal company. Noting that his associates had two men ready to leave for Miami as soon as they learned which section was available, Patterson asked Wombwell to help "hurry the matter some."<sup>18</sup>

The correspondence between Patterson and Wombwell continued through July. Among the topics discussed were the necessity for good



**Duncan U. Fletcher, ca.1890.**

transportation facilities, and the advisability of locating the sisal enterprise in the vicinity of New River, "if we could get lands there cheap enough."<sup>19</sup> At a July 19 meeting of "parties interested" in the fiber venture, presumably including Fletcher, Patterson and Kuchler, 200 shares of stock were subscribed and an assessment raised to pay the expenses of Kuchler and real estate man Patrick A. Cunningham, the two men sent to south Florida to locate suitable land. Kuchler and Cunningham left for Dade County on August 9, returning to Jacksonville September 7. Out of the available lands visited, they recommended purchasing all of Section 35 in Township 49 South, Range 42 East, and portions of three adjoining sections, all described as "high and dry" and bordering Middle River in what is today Broward County.<sup>20</sup> The river flowed east before turning south and joining the New River, which provided access to the sea.

Fletcher relayed the information to Wombwell on September 10, asking about the availability and price of the recommended lands and indicating his anxiety to complete the purchase as soon as possible. "If any of it is canal (E.C.C.) Land," he added, "the President of that Co. Has agreed to let us have a section at \$1.50 [per acre]." Three days later, he again asked Wombwell what could be done to expedite the transaction.<sup>21</sup> The attorney for the canal company, Pleasant W. White, and George Miles appeared before the Board of Trustees of the Internal Improvement Fund on August 20, requesting that board to deed the company lands due for construction of the canal from St. Augustine to Jupiter--3,840 per mile for 102 miles. The board instructed its salesman "to select and set apart for the Florida Coast Line Canal and Transportation Company as a reserve" the appropriate lands and then prepare deeds. This process caused some delay. Not until the selections were made and reserved and deeds prepared could clear title be transferred to the fiber investors.<sup>22</sup> The State deeded the property to the canal company on September 24, and on November 22,

Please place this circular in the book you will receive from Washington. After reading, please hand to some of your friends whom you think might feel interested in the matter.

## THE FLORIDA FIBER CO.

INCORPORATED UNDER THE LAWS OF THE STATE OF  
FLORIDA.

PLANTATION, 1310 ACRES LAND IN DADE COUNTY.

CAPITAL STOCK. \$40,000.00.

D. U. FLETCHER, President.

E. I. ROBINSON, Treasurer.

E. C. PATTERSON, Secretary.

A copy of the report on Sisal Hemp Culture in the United States, issued by the Department of Agriculture at Washington, D. C., has been mailed to you at our request. The members of this corporation, aware that one of the greatest wealth producing industries of this State had been neglected, decided to start the business on a large scale, feeling confident that, when the facts were properly placed before the

### Promotional circular published by the Florida Fiber Company in 1890.

the canal company in turn sold 1,310.30 acres bordering Middle River to Fletcher for \$2,293.07, or \$1.75 an acre.<sup>23</sup>

Within weeks after securing the land, Fletcher and his associates formally organized the Florida Fiber Company, with \$40,000 capital stock, half of which was paid, presumably by the company's organizers. Fletcher, who deeded the Middle River tract to the company, appears to have been the principal investor, and was selected president. Cigar manufacturer Henry M. Fritot served as vice-president, Edward I. Robinson of the Florida Dime Savings Bank as treasurer, and E. C. Patterson as secretary.<sup>24</sup>

As one of their first official acts, the Fiber Company issued an eight page prospectus, printed by the Dacosta Printing and Publishing House of Jacksonville as a folded brochure in late December 1890. The *Prospectus* gave a brief history of sisal cultivation in Florida, growing and import statistics, and reprinted encouraging correspondence from Wombwell and Dodge. It noted that because of Florida sisal's superior qualities, "a large northern manufacturer" had stated he would pay

twelve cents per pound rather than the ten cents he was paying for Yucatan imports, which included a \$15.00 per ton duty under the McKinley Tariff Act. Despite this optimistic report, the *Prospectus* furnished a more conservative estimate of six and a half cents per pound. In discussing the company's ability to grow sisal and manufacture hemp fiber, the *Prospectus* noted that wild plants growing along the coast would furnish all the seedlings needed, and that any of three decorticating machines available would be suitable for extracting the fiber. It closed by stating that none of the officers would receive a salary for the first three years of operation and advising that, "Our stock books are now open for the sale of 100 shares fully paid up, non-assessable stock on very favorable terms. For further information apply to D. U. Fletcher, President, or any officer of the company."<sup>25</sup>

In addition to the *Prospectus*, the company issued an advertising circular which favorably compared sisal growing to cotton, and optimistically predicted that with "250,000 acres...we can hardly produce enough to supply two manufacturing--the Suffolk Cordage Company



of Chelsea, Mass. and the immense Agricultural Implement Works of Wm Deering, Chicago, Ill." But even making a small dent in such a huge market, the circular warned, would take substantial investment, "unless a good portion of our treasury stock is sold, [it] will not enable us to fully accomplish our purpose, i.e., to have 1,000 acres within a year, in order that we may put up machinery and commence cutting within three years." The fiber company forwarded the mailing list of potential investors receiving the circular to the United States Department of Agriculture with the request that they also receive a copy of Charles Richards Dodge's first report on Florida fibers, which gave a glowing account of the prospects for sisal.<sup>26</sup>

Dodge's information included the notation that sisal had been growing successfully in the Bahamas with the additional benefit of a government bounty. He also observed that samples sent to London by Bahamian growers "were pronounced better than the Mexican." The Special Agent then declared, "Judging from the samples of Florida sisal received by the Department during the past year, I am satisfied that as far as the mere question of ability to grow the plant is concerned, sisal may be cultivated as successfully in Florida as in the Bahamas, and as good a fiber can be produced." He was, however, cautious as to the cost of production

and the effect of the removal of the fifteen dollar per ton duty on imported sisal. These questions were important to Florida's potential sisal producers, since the cost could be prohibitive in the former case and competition too strong from foreign sources in the latter. But, optimist that he was, Dodge opined: "There are several machines of American invention for cleaning the fiber which give promise of success, and altogether the outlook seems hopeful."<sup>27</sup>

By the close of 1890, the Florida Fiber Company had leased property on Indian Key from which to procure wild sisal plants. In March 1891, J. R. Kuchler arrived in south Florida with a boat and a "force of men" to begin operations. Federal fiber investigator Dodge, returning to Florida in early 1891, noted "considerable inquiry" into the Florida Fiber Company project, but stated that as the company was "just breaking ground," he did not visit its Middle River site, concentrating his studies at Cape Canaveral, Jupiter and Juno, Miami, Cutler, the Keys, and the lower west coast as far north as Punta Gorda. During the spring, Kuchler and his party continued clearing land and brought over 100,000 sisal slips, described as "some of Perrine's original stock," from Indian Key. They erected two houses on their Middle River property and set out over 5,000 plants in a ten acre grove, planting them eight feet apart

#### DADE TO THE FRONT.

A New Industry to be Developed in this Fertile Region of Florida.

Some of Jacksonville's enterprising business men, operating in Dade County, have taken the first steps toward the establishment of a very important industry in Florida. As "great oaks from little acorns grow," so this incipient effort of the Florida Fiber Company may be regarded as the beginning of an industry which may eventually bring more money into the State than any other except the phosphate business.

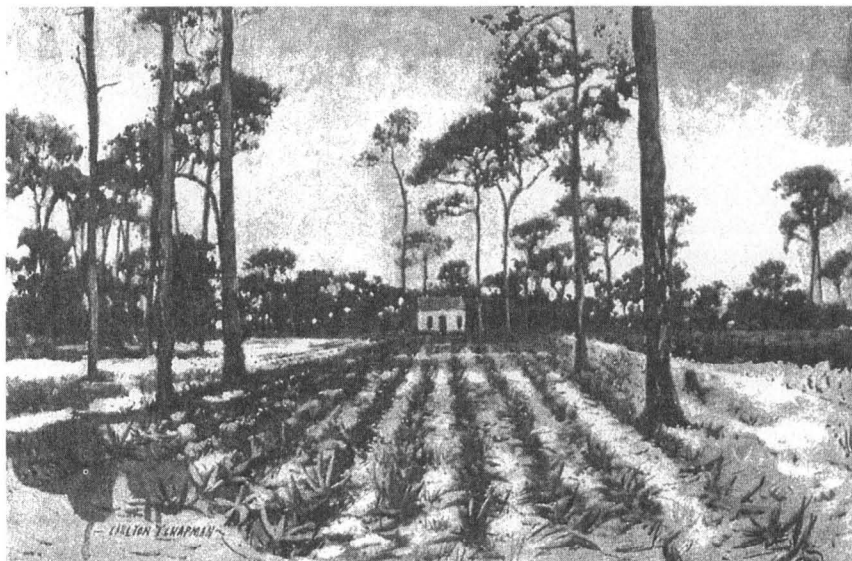
What the possibilities of this industry are may be judged from the fact that \$16,000,000 worth of sisal hemp fiber were used in the United States last year. That this fiber can be grown in Florida as well as in Yucatan, is a demonstrated fact. Enough to supply

#### Article from the Juno Tropical Sun, August 26, 1891.

in rows ten feet apart, close to 600 plants per acre. The bulk of the small plants were placed in nurseries for future planting as the land was cleared.<sup>28</sup>

By early July, the company had procured over 200,000 seedlings and was clearing additional acreage. On July 2, in response to an earlier complaint that nothing was being done to promote sisal culture in the state, Duncan Fletcher wrote a letter to the editor of Jacksonville's *Florida Times-Union*. Fletcher's letter, outlining the fiber company's operations and declaring that the plant only needed "favorable soil, freedom from cold and the sun's rays" to flourish, was reprinted in several other newspapers around the state, giving the company wide publicity.<sup>29</sup> The favorable press continued through the summer. An August 23 *Florida Times-Union* article remarked that Florida could supply the world's sisal market, and predicted that the hemp industry "may eventually bring more money into the state than any other except the phosphate business."<sup>30</sup>

Despite such favorable reports, some unsettling questions concerning the company's sisal operations



Watercolor by Carlton T. Chapman taken from Charles Richards Dodge's photo of the Florida Fiber Company's Middle River farm.

began to surface in the latter part of 1891. As early as August, the same *Times-Union* article which had praised the industry as a potential giant noted that the plentiful cheap labor which made the sisal harvest so profitable in the Yucatan was absent in south Florida, where machinery would have to be substituted. While this fact had been acknowledged by the fiber company founders from the beginning, they had always brushed the question aside with the comment that several suitable fiber-extraction or decorticating machines were available. The *Times-Union*, however, commented that the availability of effective machines was questionable, but echoing Dodge's earlier optimism, it declared, "American inventive genius may be trusted to supply all mechanical appliances that may be needed."<sup>31</sup>

Why the shrewd, successful and conservative businessmen who founded the fiber company would remain committed to an enterprise whose essential technology was in question may be partially answered in an interview with J. R. Kuchler that appeared in the *Times-Union* on November 15. "We have a very valuable tract," Kuchler stated, "for which the company could any day get twice what it cost and which will soon be worth more than the whole capital stock of the company."<sup>32</sup> The con-

tinued progress of the Florida East Coast Canal and plans to extend the canal south through Dade County promised to increase the property's value even further, both as an agricultural concern and as a speculative investment. This fact was well understood by the fiber company's officers, whose dealings with the canal company to obtain the Middle River tract the previous year revealed their familiarity with the canal project. Fletcher, in particular, maintained a lifelong interest in the development of Florida's waterways, and by late 1891, had become a leader in Jacksonville's Progressive political faction known as the "Straight-outs." Another emerging leader and canal advocate who belonged to this group was Napoleon Bonaparte Broward.<sup>33</sup>

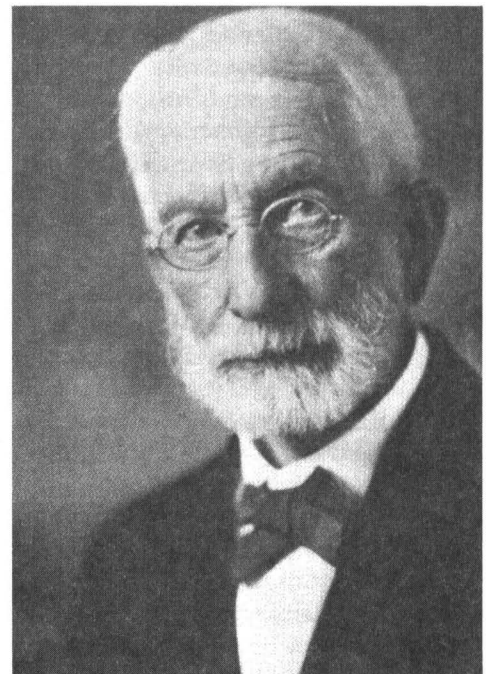
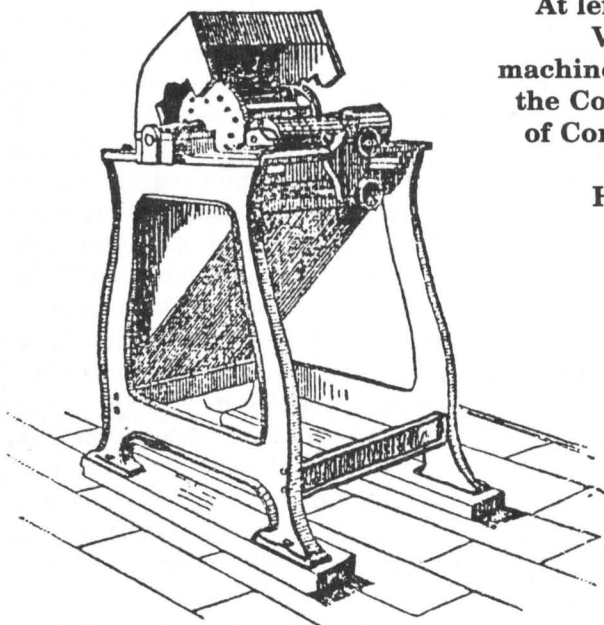
If Fletcher and the company's other officers doubted that the hemp operation would fulfill its inflated promise, they had no intention of losing their investment while waiting for the completion of the canal. On December 11, 1891, the company petitioned the Dade County Board of Commissioners for a reduction of taxes from \$32.41 "down to some nominal figure." The petition cited the crop's long maturation and production period and its benefits in "attracting settlers, opening up the country between Lake Worth and Miami, advertising the County and

in every way drawing attention to your climate, your soil, and your advantages." As if to answer any doubts as to the investors' purposes, it bluntly stated, "We are not adventurers or speculators but we are pushing an industry which is receiving attention in this country and in Europe...."<sup>34</sup>

Indeed, cultivation efforts continued through the following year. Charles Richards Dodge had returned to south Florida in the fall of 1891, and from his base at Commodore Ralph Munroe's Coconut Grove homestead, conducted numerous studies with sisal as well as ramie, pineapple, coconut palm, palmetto, and sansevieria fibers. To address the troubling question of fiber extraction, he set up a Van Buren decorticating machine, with which he reportedly processed three tons of sisal leaves, mostly from Indian Key.<sup>35</sup> Dodge's continuing investigations were funded by an 1891 appropriation of \$8,000 to the Department of Agriculture. In March 1892, the Department announced that \$1,000 of this fund would be used to provide 100,000 seed plants to the Florida Fiber Company's Middle River plantation.<sup>36</sup>

Dodge visited the plantation in early April, photographed the operations, and reported that "a substantial beginning" had been made under

At left is an engraving of the Van Buren decorticating machine that Dodge brought to the Coconut Grove homestead of Commodore Ralph Munroe (right, courtesy of the Historical Association of Southern Florida).







James E. Ingraham

Kuchler's management.<sup>37</sup> Reporting Dodge's activities to the *Florida Times-Union*, Fletcher stated that the company now had twenty acres in cultivation and twenty-five more being planted, presumably with the new plants received from the Department of Agriculture.<sup>38</sup>

Accounts by other visitors in April present a different view of the fiber company farm. As a result of a meeting between railroad barons Henry B. Plant and Henry M. Flagler in Tampa in February 1892, James E. Ingraham, president of Plant's South Florida Railroad, led an expedition across the Everglades from Fort Myers to Miami to determine the feasibility of a cross-state route connecting possible extensions of Plant's and Flagler's lines down the Gulf and Atlantic coasts of south Florida. After reaching Miami, Ingraham's party journeyed up the east coast, visiting New River and the Fort Lauderdale House of Refuge, where they met C. G. Phillips, then in charge of the fiber company. Accepting Phillips' invitation, they spent part of April 13 touring the Middle River property. Accounts by Ingraham and Wallace Moses, secretary of the expedition, state that the fiber farm had only eight acres in cultivation, and that the two houses on the property were one-room frame structures, "unfinished inside." Moses quoted Phillips as saying that while fertilizer helped the plants grow faster and larger, it also injured the fiber and was there-

fore not recommended. Ingraham stated that the company hoped to increase their production to 1,200 acres and clear \$75.00 per acre.<sup>39</sup>

Ingraham's visit raises another issue affecting the future of the fiber company and its property--the prospects for an extension of Flagler's railroad through southeast Florida. As a result of his south Florida survey, Ingraham was hired by Henry Flagler, who in 1892 obtained a state charter allowing him to continue his railroad as far south as Miami. By the end of the year, the railroad had been extended to New Smyrna, and early in 1893, Flagler and his associates began plans for an extension to Palm Beach. In March 1893, an article which appeared in the *Titusville Advocate* and the *Tropical Sun* confidently predicted the railroad's arrival at New River or Biscayne Bay.<sup>40</sup> Duncan Fletcher, serving in the 1893 Florida Legislature, enhanced his reputation as one of the state's Progressive leaders by spearheading an unsuccessful drive to regulate railroads. But at the same time he maintained close personal and professional ties to leading railroad officials, especially Joseph R. Parrott, a former law associate now serving as director of Flagler's Jacksonville, St. Augustine and Indian River Railway Company. Railroads were not always opposed to regulation if they felt they could control it.<sup>41</sup>

Significantly, press coverage of the fiber company's operations decreased dramatically after mid-1892. A reprint of the company's 1890 *Prospectus* in the August 25 *Tropical Sun* proved to be the last major article promoting the sisal farm.<sup>42</sup> By the end of the year, attention in southeast Florida focused on the construction of Dade County's public road from Lantana at the southern end of Lake Worth to Lemon City on Biscayne Bay. A March 1893 article about the road in the *Titusville Advocate* commented, "On Middle River is located the plantation of the Florida Fiber Company of which we have read so much....Very little has been done by this concern in the way of cultivating sisal hemp; the actual area planted out being less than two

acres, it is not worth talking about."<sup>43</sup> While this account appears exaggerated, it stands in marked contrast to earlier laudatory articles in newspapers across the state.

With sisal operations stagnating if not declining, the fiber company began to look for other crops to derive some income from the tract. In March 1893, J. R. Kuchler supervised the planting of seven acres of lemon trees.<sup>44</sup> In the succeeding months, the company planted a variety of tropical and subtropical plants, including the fiber-producing sansevieria, bananas, coconut palms, limes, avocados, guavas, and pineapples, as well as tomatoes.<sup>45</sup> On January 23, 1894, the company filed a plat of the Middle River property with the Dade County Clerk's office, indicating an increased emphasis on selling the land. Certainly the anticipated extension of Flagler's railroad, which would reach West Palm Beach in April, and the commencement of dredging the East Coast Canal between the Hillsboro and New Rivers encouraged the company's real estate prospects.<sup>46</sup>

Land sales rapidly followed the platting, the first deeds appearing in the Dade County records in March 1894. Most of the sales involved small agricultural plots, ranging between three and fifteen acres and sold at approximately ten dollars an acre, chiefly to local residents and to the company's own officers'. Purchasers included Fort Lauderdale House of Refuge keepers Dennis O'Neill and John Fromberger, Biscayne Bay pioneers Jean de Hedouville, Stephen Andrews, Florence Nugent, and Frederick Morse, and Patrick Cunningham and Annie (Mrs. J. R.) Kuchler of the fiber company. A June interview with Morse, who was serving as Dade County's representative in the Florida Legislature and would later become a land agent for the Florida East Coast Railway, described the "very promising settlement" of the New River area, and stated that the fiber company was laying off town lots on their plantation and making "a good many" sales to settlers.<sup>47</sup>

Agriculture throughout much of Florida suffered as a result of the

"Great Freeze," actually two freezes, the first of which struck the state on December 29, 1894. Responding to Duncan Fletcher's inquiry, Patrick A. Cunningham, by now manager of the fiber company's farm, reported one month later that temperatures had remained below freezing for nine hours, but that crop damage was minimal. Bananas and coconut palms were particularly hard hit, but after being cut back were sprouting new shoots. Frost nipped tomatoes and sansevieria, and guava trees dropped their leaves. Sisal, as well as pineapples and lemon, lime and avocado trees, survived unscathed.<sup>48</sup> Cunningham's letter casts doubt on later accounts that the freeze destroyed the company's sisal operations. Although a second hard freeze, on February 7, 1895, may have caused more extensive damage, it is clear that sisal cultivation had ceased to be the company's major interest well before the "Great Freeze."

One tantalizing sidelight to Cunningham's letter is his mention of John Dunn's presence at the plantation. Writing in 1960, Fort Lauderdale newspaper columnist Wesley Stout speculated that Dunn might have been "Jolly John" Dunn, who two years later served as chief engineer aboard the tug *Dauntless*, which ran filibustering expeditions out of New River during the Cuban insurrection.<sup>49</sup> Whether or not the fiber farm was actually used as a filibustering base may never be known, but the association of Cuban-born

fiber company vice-president Henry P. Fritot with filibusterer Napoleon Broward in the tug business and the indictment of Fritot, Dunn, and others on gunrunning charges in 1897 lends credibility to the theory.<sup>50</sup>

Domestic fiber development remained a topic of interest in Florida and across the United States in the years preceding the Spanish-American War, and various publications continued to promote the industry. The *Florida Times-Union* enthusiastically quoted a *New York Mail and Express* editorial on Florida leaf fibers in February 1894, and a November 1895 *Tampa Tribune* article discussed the prospects for ramie cultivation in south Florida.<sup>51</sup> As late as November 1900, after the Spanish-American War and resulting American occupation of the Philippines opened the Manila hemp market, Jacksonville newspapers and the Flagler-controlled Model Land Company promoted the development of palmetto fiber production.<sup>52</sup> One of the few accounts from this period mentioning the Florida Fiber Company, the ramie article in the *Tampa Tribune*, referred to the Middle River enterprise as "a somewhat extensive experimental plantation," but stated that it was "now, we believe, discontinued." This account blamed the difficulty in extracting fiber for the operation's demise, but mentioned new machinery and encouraged a second look at the industry.<sup>53</sup>

One of the last published reports of the fiber company's sisal work appeared in an 1896-1897 business di-

rectory of Dade County, which traced the industry's history in Florida, beginning with Dr. Perrine. The directory also blamed the lack of proper extraction machinery for the industry's failure to live up to expectations, but ended on a positive note, advising that "This difficulty will be overcome without doubt before long, when the industry will assume large proportions."<sup>54</sup>

None of the articles which lamented or minimized the end of the sisal venture mentioned that the Florida Fiber Company remained an active concern, directing its attention toward real estate sales as the railroad and canal began to open the lower east coast to settlement. The canal company completed the channel between the Hillsboro and New Rivers in October 1894, and railroad construction through the region began the following year.<sup>55</sup> The townsite begun in 1894 was surveyed in 1895. Named "Progreso," it comprised approximately five-eighths of a township in the lower half of the fiber company property. Indicative of the close contact between the fiber company and the railroad, Progreso was surveyed by A. L. Knowlton, the civil engineer who also surveyed the Town of Fort Lauderdale for the Florida East Coast Railway the same year. The fiber company filed Knowlton's Progreso plat on April 15, 1896, the same day that the F.E.C. opened for service to Miami.<sup>56</sup> A September 1896 advertisement, offering "New River Lands at a Bargain," claimed that Progreso boasted a railroad station and \$6,000 in street improvements, making it "one of the best colony properties in the state."<sup>57</sup>

In spite of the railroad's arrival, by the turn of the century the investors may have feared that their real estate efforts would meet the same fate as the fiber farm. As mentioned earlier, the relatively few sales involved local settlers and principals in the company. As one newspaper article explained, the railway's terminus at Miami, and Flagler's construction of the massive Royal Palm Hotel, made that city a "southern mecca," while the country surrounding the New and Middle Rivers was

## H. M. FRITOT, CIGAR MANUFACTURER,

And Wholesale and Retail Dealer in

CIGARS, TOBACCO, SNUFF,  
AND

## FRUIT DEALER,

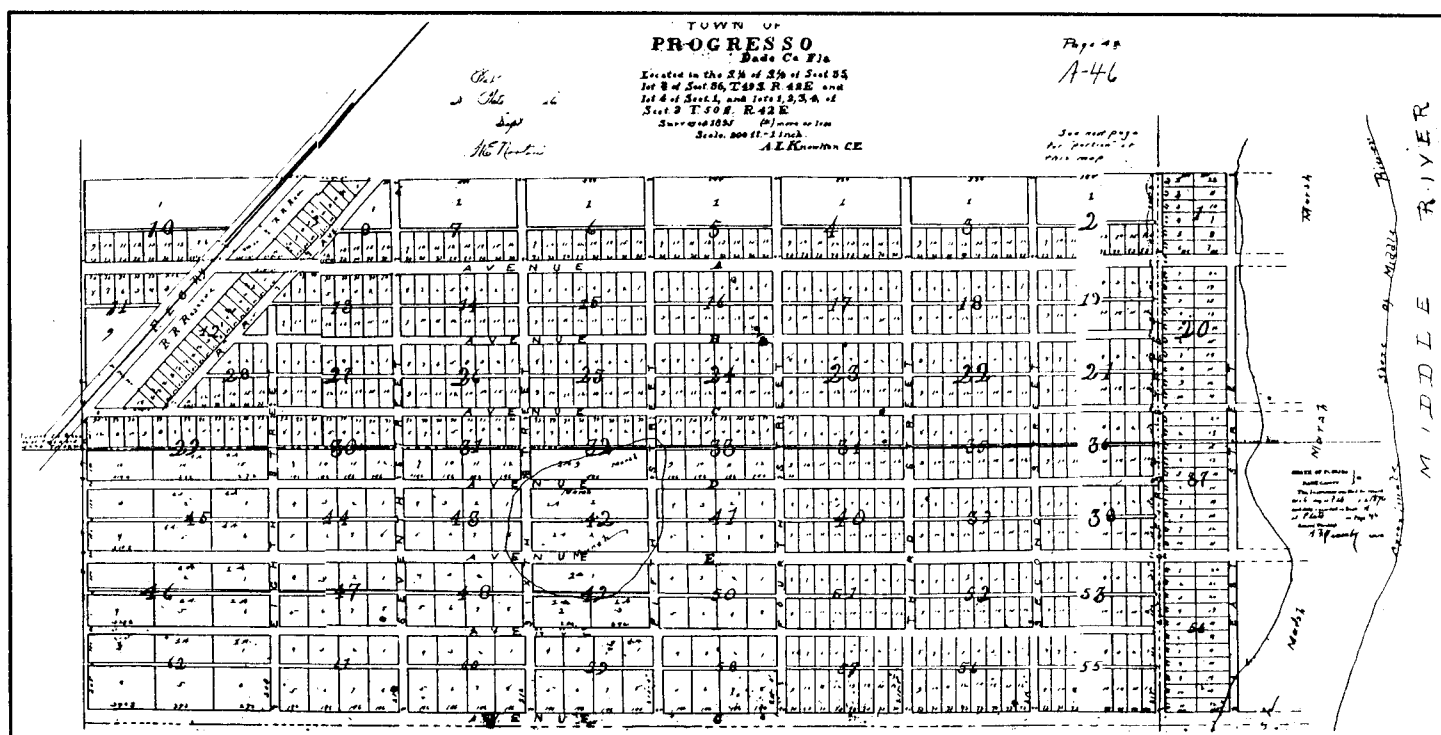
No. 23 East Bay Street,

Corner Newnan,

JACKSONVILLE, FLA.

Fiber Company Vice-President Henry M. Fritot's advertisement in the 1878 Jacksonville City Directory.





## New River Lands AT A BARGAIN.

On the East Coast, 830 acres adjoining on the south of the new town of Progresso, where more than \$40,000 has been expended in street improvements, also one mile north of Fort Lauderdale. The north prong of New river passes through the western edge of the tract, while Middle river lies on the east. This is one of the cheapest properties on the East Coast, other lands held at \$25 to \$100 an acre. We offer this tract for a short time at a great bargain. We can include the town of Progresso and 900 acres more of land, making one compact body or tract excellent vegetable and farming lands, making a total acreage of about 1,700 acres, with about 1,000 building lots, at a great bargain to a substantial colony. This is one of the best colony properties in the state. The East Coast railroad passes through the tract and has a station at Progresso, where trains stop regularly.

We will be pleased to give particulars to those meaning business.

C. C. ROBERTSON,  
Hogan and Adams Sts.

At top is A. L. Knowlton's 1895 plat of Progresso; at left is an advertisement for Progresso lands in the Jacksonville *Florida Times-Union* from September 13, 1896.

"seldom heard of now-a-days."<sup>58</sup>

Land sales moved at a discouraging slow pace through the early years of the new century as well, but experienced a small upturn in 1905 and 1906, as long-discussed state plans to drain the Everglades began to take shape during the administrations of Governors William Sherman Jennings and Napoleon Bonaparte Broward, both Jacksonville residents and, at times, political allies of Dun-

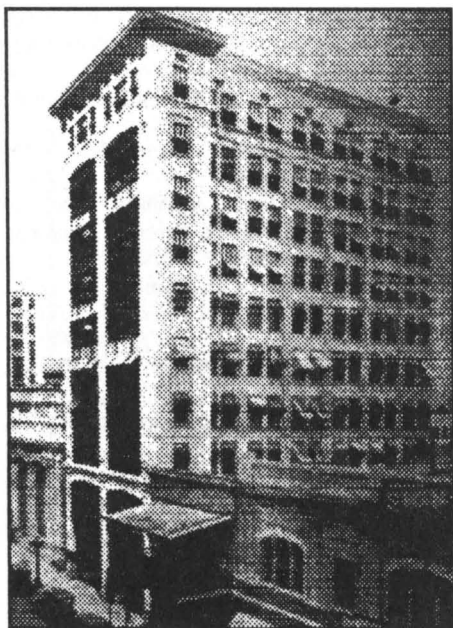
can U. Fletcher. At the close of 1905, the fiber company sold a tract to John M. Bryan of Kissimmee and Dania for \$390, one of its single largest sales to date. Bryan, a longtime state railroad commissioner, was the father of William James Bryan, a Jacksonville Broward lieutenant who, the previous year, had successfully nominated Fletcher as chairman of the Florida Democratic Party.<sup>59</sup>

The December 1905 decision of

the Board of Trustees of the Internal Improvement Fund, led by Governor Broward, to initiate the drainage project at New River, approximately six miles from the fiber company's property, no doubt boosted the value of the company's Middle River tract tremendously. Broward visited Fort Lauderdale frequently in early 1906 to supervise dredge construction. He and his family christened the first dredge, the *Everglades*, on April 2. On March 10, the Fort Lauderdale correspondent for the *Florida Times-Union* reported that Fletcher, "who owns some very valuable land here," was visiting the tiny hamlet on New River.<sup>60</sup>

The launching of the drainage project at New River did not result in any immediate financial windfall for the fiber company. Perhaps Fletcher's preoccupation with politics on the state level distracted his real estate activities. In November 1907 he announced his candidacy for the United States Senate. When incumbent Senator Stephen R. Mallory died the following month, Governor Broward's appointment of William James Bryan to the seat, coupled with rumors that Broward himself planned to enter the race, triggered a split in the Progressive wing of

Florida's Democratic party. Bryan's sudden death from typhoid fever in March, Broward's subsequent appointment of William H. Milton to the seat, and Broward's formal announcement of his own candidacy at the end of the month further muddied the political waters. In the ensuing campaign, both leading candidates sought to assure voters of their "Progressive" credentials, while attacking their opponent's "corporate" ties. Broward and his supporters condemned Fletcher's legal representation of railroads, especially Flagler's F.E.C. line. Fletcher, in turn, stumped the state, criticizing the Governor's own business dealings with the F.E.C., his administration's compromises with the railroads over land claims, and his appointment of the conservative Milton as interim senator. Fletcher carefully refrained from directly attacking the popular Everglades reclamation concept, but pointedly remarked that the particular drainage program the Governor endorsed would take "five hundred years" to complete. Broward carried the first primary in May by over 2,000 votes, but Fletcher won the June runoff by a margin of more than 3,000 ballots.<sup>61</sup>



**Jacksonville's Bisbee Building, headquarters of the Florida Fiber Company and the Florida Fruit Lands Company.**

Another reason for the Florida Fiber Company's reluctance to pursue a more aggressive land sales campaign in the months immediately following the launch of the drainage project may be found in Fletcher's 1908 campaign rhetoric. Fletcher clearly realized--as did Broward himself by 1908--that a strictly state-financed drainage project was doomed to failure. The key to obtaining the necessary funding to keep the struggling project alive, to maintain public support, and to insure the desirability and profitability of south Florida property bordering the Everglades lay in the sale of large tracts of public lands to private concerns. These corporations would not only pay large sums to the state to keep the project solvent, but would initiate their own drainage and advertising campaigns to attract settlers to the lands being reclaimed.

The Trustees of the Internal Improvement Fund began large-scale sales of its Everglades land in late 1908, and in 1909 the Florida Fiber Company renewed its sales efforts. That the company was not bankrupt or financially desperate is apparent from its headquarters in Jacksonville's new ten-story Bisbee Building, Florida's first reinforced concrete highrise and the city's most prestigious business address.<sup>62</sup> Similar to the 1890s real estate push, local settlers made up the first few buyers attracted by the new advertising campaign.<sup>63</sup> However, nearly twenty years' patience and perseverance on the part of the fiber company investors was about to pay off. In December 1908, Colorado real estate speculator Richard J. Bolles' Florida Fruit Lands Company had purchased 500,000 acres of Everglades land from the state trustees at \$2.00 per acre, the largest sale of land negotiated under the state's new program. Like other purchasers of Everglades tracts, Bolles hoped to offer his prospective buyers the added inducement of a high and dry town lot near the coast.<sup>64</sup> On February 1, 1910, the Florida Fruit Lands Company purchased the Town of Progresso and most of the remaining adjacent farmlands from the Florida Fiber Company. For land

which the Fiber Company had paid \$1.75 an acre in 1890, the Florida Fruit Lands offered \$20.00 an acre.<sup>65</sup> With the sale of an additional small plot to an individual purchaser in September 1910, the Florida Fiber Company passed from the south Florida scene, twenty years after it attracted statewide attention with its plans to grow sisal hemp.<sup>66</sup>

Why did the much-publicized attempt to grow hemp on Middle River fail? The traditional explanations of freeze and resulting disease may have been a factor, but the crop, as a leading money-maker, was in decline before these problems arose. The lack of suitable machinery for extracting the fiber was a major reason, but one which was known to the company's founders from the beginning. Perhaps Commodore Ralph Munroe, who had visited the plantation and assisted Charles Richards Dodge with his fiber investigations in the early 1890s, best summed up the company's failure to cultivate sisal profitably when he wrote, "Presumably their lands became too valuable for sisal culture within a short time, as both canal and railroad were talked of soon after their purchase, and the railroad came to Lauderdale within five years...the growing tourist development finally ended the movement."<sup>67</sup> But the history of the Florida Fiber Company is not a story of failure. The farsighted business ability and far-reaching political connections of its founders, most notably Duncan U. Fletcher, saw the enterprise as far more than an agricultural venture, allowing the company to weather not only the collapse of its sisal plans but the disappointingly slow development which followed the completion of the railroad and canal. As a result, the company's extensive tract finally paid its investors well as Everglades drainage and resulting land sales opened the Fort Lauderdale area to extensive settlement two decades after the company's formation.



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