

# DRAINING THE EVERGLADES

## Governor Broward's Plan Makes Possible The Development Of South Florida

A documentary feature  
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and Patrick R. Currie

*Editor's Note: The recent placement of the North New River Canal Boat Lock #1 on the National Register of Historic Places, coupled with the large-scale development of western Broward County, has spurred local interest in south Florida's canal system. Begun shortly after the turn of the century, the drainage and transportation canals were a major force behind the transformation of Broward County from a watery wasteland into a major urban and agricultural center.*

*This issue's documentary feature comes from New River Chronicle, the published results of a research project sponsored by the Fort Lauderdale Historical Society with a Youthgrant from the National Endowment for the Humanities.*

For three hundred years men had contemplated the bounty which might be reaped by draining and farming the Everglades. It was not until the 20th Century, however, that the technical means for such a mammoth undertaking were readily at hand. And it was not until the present century that a man appeared — Governor Napoleon Broward — capable of assembling the support necessary to make the project possible.

One of Broward's most vocal supporters in this endeavor was Tom Watson, the Georgia populist and editor of *Watson's Jeffersonian Magazine*. In excerpts from two issues of his journal (1907,08), we learn about the tenor and expectations of the times and the men that made them:

For several years the voters of the State of Florida have been kept in a state of agitation over the question of the drainage of the vast region known as the Everglades.

*Can this wild, weird expanse of marsh, saw-grass and quivering hammocks be opened up to successful cultivation?*

*How shall it be done?*

*At whose expense, shall it be done?*

*How much will the experiment cost and who will be the chief beneficiaries?*

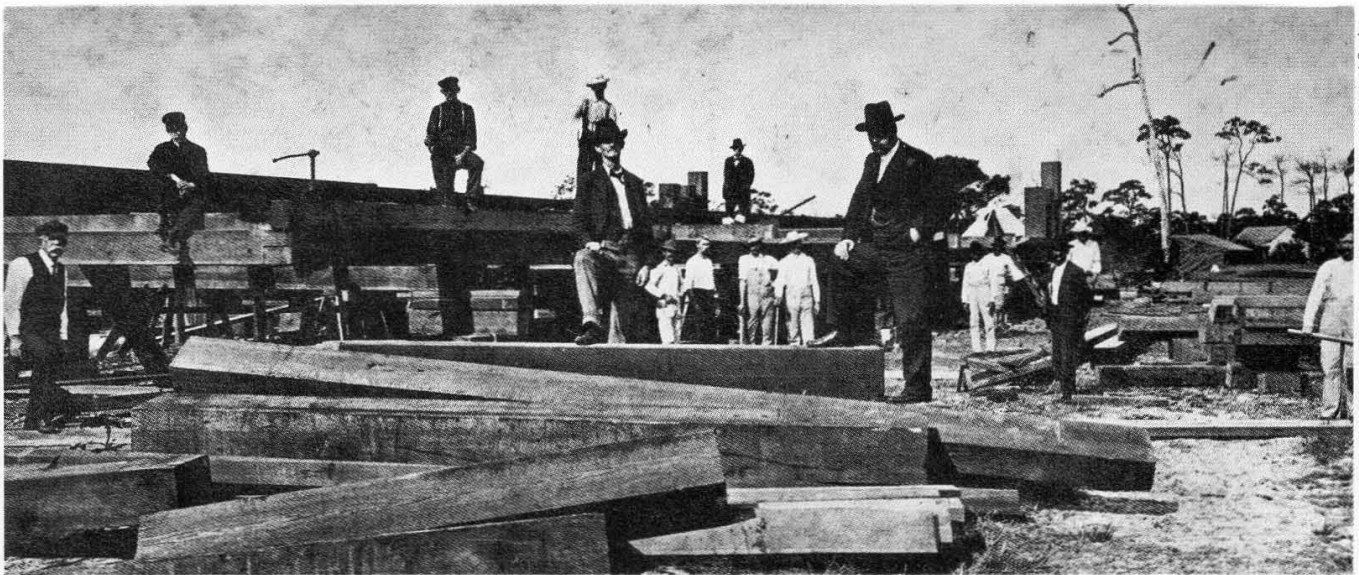
Each of these questions has been eagerly debated, and opinions vary widely . . .

Here are some of the reasons why the Everglades should be drained:

First of all, it is not so important to the State, who owns the land so long as it is drained and placed on the tax books.

In the second place, the State should cut the canals and see to it that the land is drained. No city government waits for a title to land to be determined, but proceeds to pave, sewer and water, and charges to the abutting property.

The area to be reclaimed is about as large as four States the size of Rhode Island, or about five million acres of land; and two million more will be beneficially affected by the drainage. The lands to be reclaimed are further south than any other land in the United



Fort Lauderdale Historical Society

Governor Napoleon Broward (foreground) came to Fort Lauderdale in 1906 to inspect the construction of the New River canal dredges. The dredge *Okeechobee*, being assembled in this photograph, was later under the command of Captain W. S. Holloway.

States, and is, in fact, the particular portion that distinguishes Florida from any other State in the Union. As to what crops may be grown upon that particular portion of the State, and the value of the crops, the reader is referred to two articles written upon the subject, one by Colonel Kraemer, a civil engineer, which article was written in 1881, and the other by Governor Broward. The statistics cited by

Colonel Kraemer, we suppose, were from the Treasury Department. Those cited by Governor Broward were from the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

#### EXTRACT FROM REPORT OF J. M. KRAEMER

But now that your dredge is at work I do not depend upon estimates, but am able to give you actual figures.

The plans include the cutting of 500 miles in round numbers of large drainage canals from Okeechobee to Tidewater, ranging from 50 to 120 feet wide and 10 feet deep.

It costs \$1,200 per month to operate each dredge. Each dredge will move six cubic yards of material per minute, or 93,600 per month of 26 working days. Each dredge will cut nearly one mile of canal per month of the average width of 60 feet.

It costs \$1,200 per month to operate each dredge or \$635,000 for the 500 miles of canal. Add to this \$300,000, the cost of six dredges, at an average of \$50,000 each and add also \$100,000 for repairs and the total cost of the waterways or main drainage canals will be \$1,035,000.

#### VALUE OF LANDS WHEN DRAINED

In his report to his employer, Hamilton Disston, Kraemer, in 1881, said:

The import duties on sugar for manufacturing purposes from the year 1847 to 1879 varied from 2¾ to 4 cents per pound. We paid out for sugar and allied products during this period, \$1,800,000,000. Our western mines produced \$1,700,000,000 or in other words, during this period of 32 years, as a nation, we paid out in round numbers \$100,000,000 *in excess of the total output in bullion or our famed bonanzas of the West, for an article of consumption every pound of which could have been produced from the soil of Southern Florida.*

But since Kraemer's report practical farmers have settled on the land in the edge of the Everglades and have demonstrated, by the remarkable success they have made, that this Everglades land, when reclaimed, is the richest and most fertile in the world. Farmers adjacent to New River shipped 125,000 crates of vegetables from Fort Lauderdale during the season just past. The commodities raised from the soil and transported on four miles of this small river now exceed in value those raised from the soil and transported on the St. Johns river, 200 miles in length. Your dredge is now in New River, cutting its way into the glades. Last year people of the United States paid out for sugar alone \$13,500,000 more than the total amount received from exports of corn, wheat, flour, beef and naval

stores added together. All of the sugar consumed in the United States in one year can be raised on a small portion of the three million acres which you own in the Everglades. One acre of land in the Everglades is capable of raising and fattening for market two head of cattle. The stockman who is obliged to fence ten acres of land elsewhere to raise two head of cattle, and is also obliged to

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*“The canal cut shows clearly the depth of the pure muck:  
it is from four to five feet deep,  
and is believed to be inexhaustible.”*

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feed them during the winter months, needs no argument to convince him that the people need the Everglades, where grass grows rich and green year round and is capable of supporting 20 times the number of cattle per acre. The farmer who is accustomed to haul to market one bale of cotton worth \$50 from three acres of ground, which he has worked early and late to cultivate, needs no argument to convince him of the necessity of opening for agricultural pursuits this vast domain when he reads that the land on the border of the Everglades, and exactly similar in character to most of that of the inside area produces year after year with small amount of work, crops which are sold at prices ranging from \$500 to \$1,500 per acre.

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...In February, 1906, the saw-grass, head-high, covered the land, and there was not a spot of dry land for miles and miles. To find a place a few inches above water where we could make coffee and take dinner, the launch then had to leave the Everglades and run down the river several miles. Now, the two great canals have cut their way, for several miles, through the saw-grass; the water has run off; the grass has been cut off and burnt; and the soil heaped up in beds, — just as in planting cotton, — and along these beds run such luxuriant tomato plants as you have seldom seen. All of the work in breaking the soil and bedding was done with the hoe. It was yet too water-sobbed to bear the weight of a horse. Even as I walked along the furrows there was the feeling of mud giving way under the feet. But by next year, the drying out process will have gone on to such an extent that the farms can be worked with the plow. . . .

I asked Mr. Griffin, one of the farmers of this new land, what his land was worth. “One Hundred dollars per acre,” he said; and when one remembers that it has been bearing a crop of tomatoes worth anywhere from \$500 to \$850 per acre, his figures seem modest enough. The canal cut shows clearly the depth of the pure



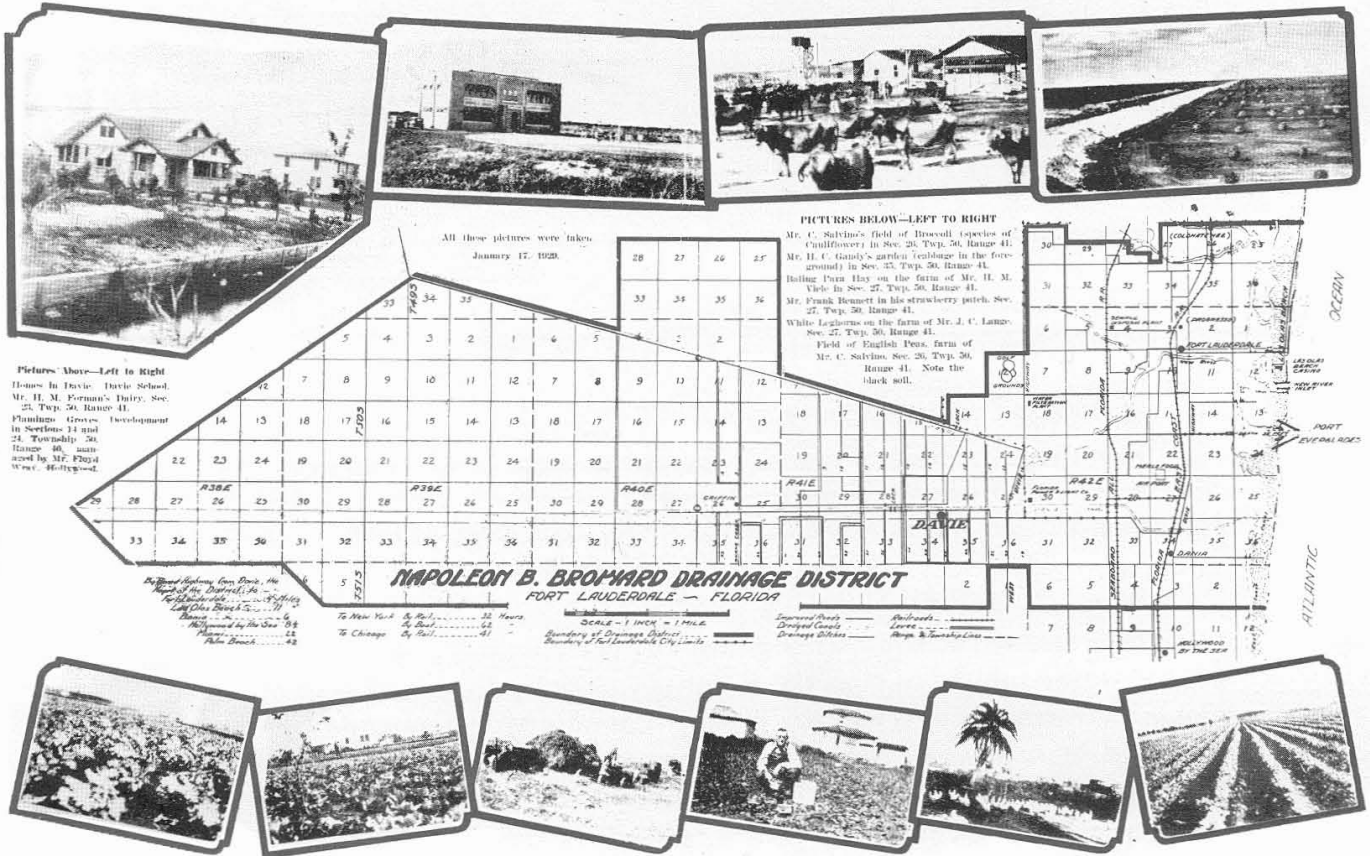
muck: it is from four to five feet deep, and is believed to be inexhaustible.

Two dredges are at work, making for the upper and lower ends of Pine Island, several miles farther into the 'Glades. Already it is estimated 12,000 acres of land have been reclaimed. This year witnesses the first test of sugar cane on this muck land, and if it succeeds, as it is almost certain to do, the wealth which will be annually produced in this redeemed wilderness will be prodigious.

...when Broward's task shall have been finished, as is now inevitable, — and the weird desolation known as the Everglades becomes famous throughout the world as one of the garden spots of the Universe, — a garden of five million acres — the entire South will thrill with the honest pride when it remembers that a self made Southern man without the aid of "Northern Capital," grappled with this herculean task and mastered it.

Sadly, Governor Broward did not live to see his grand project completed; he died in 1910. His vision was fulfilled, though. By 1913 drainage was far enough along to allow the seasonal farming of western Broward and the boat lock system made

possible cross-state barge shipping from Fort Myers through Lake Okechobee to Fort Lauderdale. The city became the "gateway to the Everglades" and assumed important stature as a transportation nexus for rail, canal, and road traffic.



Broward County Historical Commission

The project which Governor Broward began later grew into today's South Florida Water Management District. This broadside is illustrated with scenes from western Broward County in the late 1920s and promotes the agricultural development made possible by the drainage of the Everglades.