PHOTO ESSAY:

Plantations, Wars, and the Ruins: Historical Components Shaping the Halifax River Basin

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ABSTRACT

The establishment of sugar plantations in the Halifax region of Northeast Florida during the territorial era between 1821 and 1845 was significant both historically and environmentally. Sugar plantations in the Halifax region proved to be a profitable industry, albeit with a heavy reliance on enslaved people to help meet the increased demand for labor. Establishing plantations, however, resulted in significant impacts on the natural environment, including alterations to ecosystems, land-use patterns, topography, vegetation, and water quality. The Second Seminole War (1835-1842) destroyed many of these plantations, impacting the region and shaping the future social, economic, and environmental history of Northeast Florida. This photo essay reviews the visible remains of plantations and the associated past conflicts within the Halifax River region (Eastern parts of Volusia and Flagler Counties) during the early stages of the territorial era in Florida, encompassing the years between 1821 and 1845. The historic sites noted in this paper are available for public access. The photographs are accompanied with a narrative by Zach Zacharies, the Senior Curator of History at the Museum of Arts and Science of Daytona Beach, Florida.

Keywords: plantations, sugar mills, Seminole wars, ruins, Halifax River basin

SUGAR MILL PLANTATIONS AND THEIR IMPACTS ON ENVIRONMENT

The Halifax River region was known for its fertile soil and suitable climate for growing sugarcane, which attracted many planters to the area. The plantations were located in areas with suitable soil and climatic conditions, and the presence of rivers and streams was an essential factor for irrigation and transportation (Figure 1). The plantations in the Halifax region of Northeast Florida represented a significant land-use change during the colonial period.

Figure 1. Natural waterway where Halifax River and Tomoka River meet. Ormond Beach, Florida. The presence of rivers and streams was an essential factor for irrigation and transportation. Photograph by Hyun Jung Cho, November 29, 2021.

A significant influx of primarily Anglo-Celtic settlers migrated to the region with the primary intention of cultivating highly profitable cash crops, specifically sugarcane. The establishment of sugar plantations in the Halifax region of northeast Florida proved to be particularly profitable, leading to a rapid expansion of the industry and a corresponding increase in demand for labor. These planters relied heavily on enslaved people to meet the demand for labor to cultivate, harvest, and process their sugarcane crops, making slavery a significant aspect of the Halifax region's sugar plantations in the 1830s (Figure 2).

Slavery in the Halifax region was not only a brutal system of exploitation but also a deeply entrenched social and economic institution. Enslaved people had no legal rights, and their lives were subject to the whims of their owners. Yet enslaved people played a critical role in the success of the sugar industry, and slave labor was essential to the profitability of the region's sugar plantations until the destruction of the plantations during the Second Seminole War.

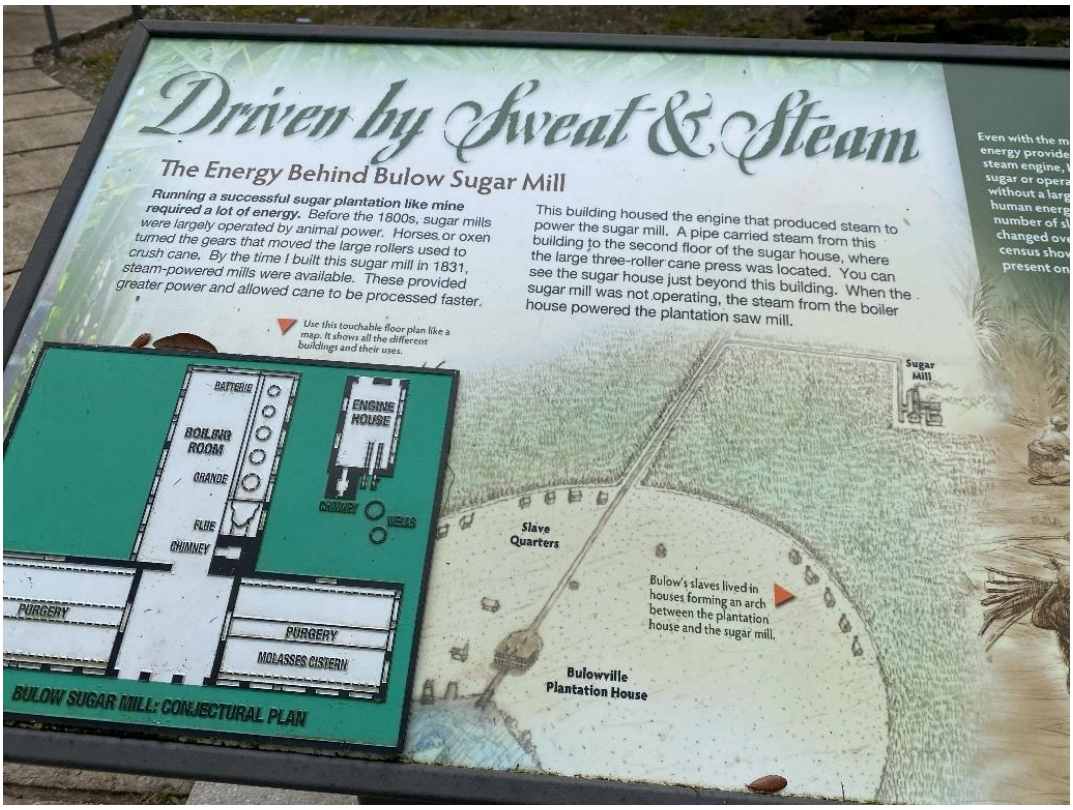

Figure 2. The establishment of sugar plantations proved to be particularly profitable, leading to a rapid expansion of the industry and a corresponding increase in demand for slave labor. Photograph of display at the Bulow Plantation Ruins Historic State Park by Hyun Jung Cho, December 18, 2021.

The establishment of these plantations altered the natural environment and had significant impacts on the surrounding ecosystems, water resources, and land use patterns (Figure 3). To begin with, the establishment of plantations required extensive land clearing, draining, and modification of the natural environment to support agricultural activities. The planters employed methods such as deforestation, drainage, and ditching to create fields and access roads. These activities altered the topography, hydrology, and vegetation of the area, leading to soil erosion, siltation, and changes in water quality. The introduction of exotic plant species such as sugarcane and citrus trees also altered the local ecosystem, replacing the native vegetation and changing the food web. The management of waste and the disposal of human excreta and other organic agricultural and domestic wastes most likely led to the contamination of soil and water resources.

Figure 3. Cruger-dePeyster Plantation Sugar Mill Ruins in New Smyrna Beach, FL. The plantations in the Halifax region of northeast Florida represented a significant land-use change during the colonial period. Photograph by Hyun Jung Cho, November 25, 2021.

THE SECOND SEMINOLE WAR AND PLANTATIONS

The Halifax sugar plantations and their enslaved populations ended with the Second Seminole War (1835-1842), a prolonged and disastrous conflict between the United States and the Seminole people (who resisted relocation to Oklahoma) that resulted in no true peace accord. Unlike the First Seminole War, which took place primarily in the Florida panhandle, the Second Seminole War was waged in east-central Florida along the St. Johns River and what is now the Intracoastal Waterway—including the Halifax River. There were major engagements in the Second Seminole War with well over a dozen sugar mill plantations destroyed at the beginning of the conflict. Chief Osceola, while not an official chief, initiated the war by directing attacks on numerous sugar plantations from St. Augustine to New Smyrna Beach, resulting in several Seminole victories in pitched battles.

During the conflict, Major Benjamin Putnam and his militia, known as the "Mosquito Roarers," seized the largest and most profitable plantation, Bulowville (Figure 4). John Joachim Bulow, who inherited the plantation after the death of his father Wilhelm, maintained amicable relations with the local Seminoles. When the militia arrived, Bulow fired a small cannon at them and was subsequently held prisoner on his own property. The plantation became known as Bulow Station and was fortified as a defensive position. In January 1835, the militia ordered an evacuation of Bulow Station, and all refugees fled to St. Augustine. John Bulow left his plantation as a prisoner of war and died a few years later in St. Augustine. The Seminoles destroyed Bulowville, including the factory and the coquina main house. Today, Bulow Plantation Ruins State Historic Park, with its visible factory ruins and wells provides visitors with a ghostly glimpse of the site's past.

Figure 4. Bulow Plantation Ruins State Historic Park, Flagler Beach, Florida. Photographs by Hyun Jung Cho, December 18, 2021

General Joseph Hernandez, a Florida native who became a soldier, politician, and plantation owner, led the Florida militia. He ordered soldiers to head south to a plantation at the present-day Dunlawton Sugar Mill Gardens, where they encountered the Seminoles who had already destroyed and burned the mill (Figure 5). A skirmish ensued, referred to as the "Battle of Dunlawton," in which the Seminoles led by Coacoochee (Wildcat) greatly outnumbered and ambushed the militia. The Mosquito Roarers were undisciplined and inexperienced in combat, and their retreat to Bulow Station resulted in four dead and fourteen wounded.

Figure 5. Sugar mill ruins at Dunlawton, Port Orange, Florida. It is a Volusia County Park and maintained by a non-profit volunteer group called Botanical Gardens of Volusia, Inc. Photographs by Hyun Jung Cho, November 14, 2021.

Other plantations, such as the Cruger-dePeyster Sugar Mill and Dummett's Carrickfergus, were also destroyed by the Seminoles (Figures 6 and 7). Initially mistaken as a Spanish mission by earlier historians, archaeological investigations have established the true function of Cruger-dePeyster as a sugar mill factory. The plantation was established by William Cruger and Henry dePeyster, who acquired 600 acres of land to cultivate sugarcane. However, the enterprise lasted only five years as Seminole warriors attacked and destroyed the plantation in 1835. The enslaved individuals belonging to Cruger-dePeyster assisted the Seminoles in destroying the property. Despite the passage of time, the ruins of the Cruger-dePeyster Sugar Mill still exist, albeit in a state of deterioration due to the challenging Florida environment, rampant vegetation growth, and damage caused by the removal of coquina stone. Notably, the remnants of the plantation bear evidence of the devastating fires set by the Seminoles during the Second Seminole War, as discernible burn marks are still evident on the coquina walls.

Figure 6. Cruger-dePeyster Plantation Sugar Mill Ruins in New Smyrna Beach, FL. Photograph by Hyun Jung Cho, November 14, 2021.

The Dummett Ruins, situated south of Bulowville roughly one mile to the west of the entrance to Tomoka State Park, is an intriguing archaeological site that merits exploration. This site is the former location of a sugar mill plantation named Carrickfergus, owned and operated by British Marine Officer Colonel Thomas Dummett. The plantation was operated by a workforce of approximately 200 enslaved Africans and was renowned for being the first steam-powered sugar mill in the Halifax region. However, in 1835, Seminole warriors destroyed the plantation. Visitors can access the site through a small parking area and can view the crumbling ruins from a designated fenced-in area. The historical significance of the Dummett Ruins as the location of an early steam-powered sugar mill and its association with the lives and labor of enslaved individuals adds further weight to its importance as an archaeological and historical site.

Figure 7. Dummett Sugar Mill Ruins in Tomoka State Park, Ormond Beach, FL. Photograph by Hyun Jung Cho, April 5, 2020.

The Mala Compra plantation, formerly owned by General Joseph Hernandez, represents an important site of historical and cultural significance (Figure 8). Born in St. Augustine in 1788, Hernandez became a brigadier general and a U.S. Territorial Member of Congress representing

Florida. He was the first Hispanic to serve in Congress and sat on the committee responsible for selecting Tallahassee as the state capital. Hernandez purchased the 800-acre Mala Compra plantation in 1816 while Florida was still under Spanish rule, choosing to remain there following the transition to U.S. ownership. Situated on the east bank of the Matanzas River in Flagler County at a location known as Bing's Landing, Mala Compra is noteworthy for being the only plantation situated on a barrier island.

The plantation operations at Mala Compra were diverse, with the cultivation of sea island cotton and oranges being the primary crops. These activities had a significant impact on the land, and archaeological studies have revealed evidence of the extensive modifications made to the natural environment to support the plantation's activities. In 1835, the plantation was converted into a military post by the U.S. government, and roughly 80 enslaved individuals worked the land. However, when the Seminole people attacked in 1836 the plantation had already been evacuated of army personnel, and the plantation house and support buildings were destroyed. Although the Seminoles were able to capture three of the enslaved individuals, the rest had apparently dispersed into the surrounding area. Mala Compra has been studied by archaeologists and is well-preserved, *with a large pavilion protecting the excavated site and offering an award-winning interpretation of its historical significance.

Most of the plantations destroyed during the Seminole Wars are inaccessible to the public or have been lost to time, but the region encompassing Volusia and Flagler County in the Halifax area of Florida is privileged to possess one of the most substantial plantation sites dating back to the Spanish and territorial periods in Florida. Mala Compra and the several other sites mentioned here provide unique opportunities to engage with the history of the Second Seminole War and to appreciate the legacy of the enslaved individuals who labored on these plantations. In addition, several of these sites offer public access, providing opportunities for the broader community to engage with the region's rich cultural heritage. The loss or destruction of any cultural heritage site represents a critical loss of evidence regarding what it means to be human, highlighting the value of preserving such sites for future generations.

Figure 8. The Mala Compra Plantation, Palm Coast, Florida (image source: https://www.visitflorida.com/)