

Toward a Historical Geography of Florida: Assessing the Consequences of Massive Population Growth

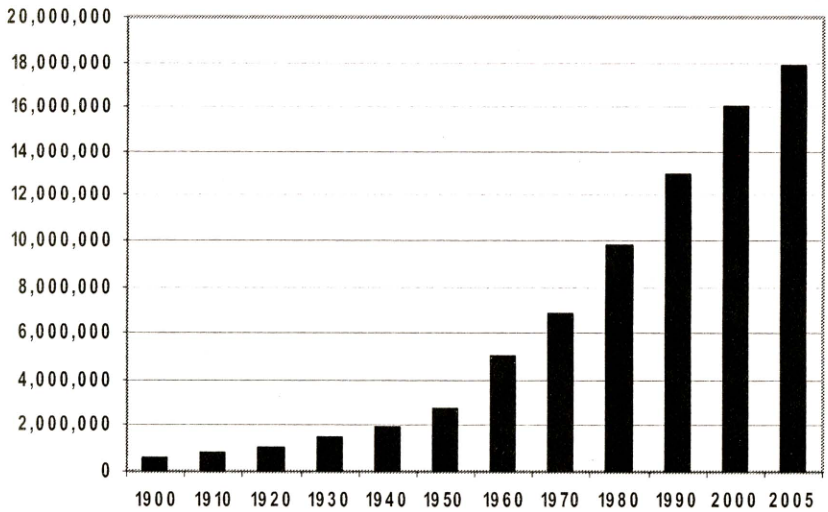
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Introduction

A historical geography of Florida? What a strange idea that must be to many contemporary central Floridians who half-heartedly assume that A.D. means "After Disney," the opening of Walt Disney World on the outskirts of Orlando in 1971—or for many historical geographers who think in terms of examining geographies of the more distant past. In spite of the fact that Florida is home to St. Augustine, "The Nation's Oldest City" (if we pretend ancient Native American communities don't count), not until well after 1900 did the state begin to show signs of being transformed from a wetland wilderness into a series of sprawling cities, strip malls, and tourist attractions. And although wetland drainage and other landscape changes were well under way by the middle of the 20th century, Florida had only 2.7 million people in 1950—on its way to nearly 18 million in 2005—and counting (Figure 1; U.S. Census). Can a historical geographic perspective possibly add anything to our understanding of this collection of places so recently (but substantially) shaped by people? I think so and indeed, Kearns built his 1992 review of historical geography around the theme of contemporary history. Moreover, although using states as units of analysis does not seem to be much in vogue among geographers these days (see Wyckoff 1999 for a rare exception), historians appear to have no such qualms (see Gannon 1996 and 2003; Mormino 2005; Davis and Arsenault 2005). I argue that because Florida is changing so fast, we need solid historical geographic work on the Sunshine State that carefully assesses the state's previous human and physical geographic patterns and processes; in this way, we can develop a clearer picture of the ways the state's population and economic growth over the past century has in some ways improved quality of life, while in other ways causing declining quality of life.

Figure 1: Florida's Population Since 1900.



Historical Geography

It is instructive to take a moment to review some relevant literature from the often-neglected field of historical geography because such a review helps situate this call for historical geographic work on Florida. By way of introduction, Baker (2003, p.3-4) differentiates between geography and history by reminding us that “historical geographers tell us stories about how *places* have been created in the past by people in their own image, while historians tell us different stories about how *periods* have been created in the past by people in their own image.” Colten et al. (2003, p.154) add that unlike historians, historical geographers “often bring to bear a richer, more scientific understanding of the natural world.” Baker admits that social theory perspectives have begun to challenge the once dominant empirical emphasis in historical geography. To be sure, much early 20th century work in the field was stuffed with a mind-numbing volume of facts, but it is also true that deeply theoretical work without empirical grounding is not very useful either. In summary, Baker (2003, p.213)

suggests "Within historical geography, as within history, there should be unrelenting criticism of all orthodoxies and conventional wisdoms, as well as unremitting awareness of discourses in cognate disciplines." Indeed, I submit that we ought to think more critically about the role of population and economic growth in reworking Florida's landscapes. Such growth has certainly provided many positive outcomes, but the conventional wisdom seems to be that growth always provides benefits in excess of problems—and I am not sure that is still true in many parts of Florida.

In any event, human-environment interaction is one of historical geography's most venerable traditions, and Colten and Dilsaver (1992, p.10) argue that "The slow moving manner of resource management policies and the incremental nature of human impacts demands historical treatment of these subjects, and historical geography offers an ideal framework for their examination." They add that we need more studies of the physical consequences of human impacts to the environment—and further treatment of the economic costs of environmental degradation and depletion of natural resources—all of which will hopefully lead us to greater emphasis upon environmental management.

Williams (1994) agrees that environmental historical geographers still have much to contribute to our understanding of 1) the transformation and modification of the earth, 2) the impacts of the spread of capitalism, 3) the place of people in nature, and 4) the interrelationships among habitat, economy, and society. Yet he warns against oversimplifying complex behavior patterns and depending too much upon ecology to explain how natural systems "should work." While he concedes that the notion of objectivity in history and in science has been subject to increasing skepticism, he maintains that we would do well to use more curiosity and waste less time trying to develop sharper logic.

Although Demeritt (1994) questions the heavy dependence upon science (especially ecology) as a way to frame stories about past environments, Cronon (1994, p.42) suggests that "Without some faith that our descriptions of reality bear at least tangential relationship to that reality, it makes little sense to worry about reality at all." Wishart

(1997) concludes that it matters not whether our interpretations of the past are objective. He argues that we should confess we cannot possibly be entirely objective in our discussion of the past so that we may open "the possibility for many legitimate interpretations of the past" (Wishart 1997, p.117).

Although McQuillen (1995, p.279) wanted to be supportive of environmentally oriented studies in his 1995 review of historical geography, he found little work worthy of comment: "Historical geographers have always been interested in aspects of environmental change over time, but they have rarely contributed to the developing literature on environmental history over the last two decades." McQuillen (1995, p.280) did cite Dilsaver and Colten's (1992) edited collection of essays entitled *The American Environment: Interpretations of Past Geographies*, but he contends that "These essays also underscore a weakness in the contribution of historical geographers to environmental history: a tendency to describe environmental change rather than to measure it . . ." Yet even if there has been an emphasis upon simply recreating and describing past environments, environmental change in Florida has been so extensive and so rapid that we would do well to begin with relatively simple descriptions of what the landscape used to look like just a half century ago—and then combine this with measuring the nature of changes in the environment since then.

In the early 1990s, Colten and Dilsaver (1992) lamented the fact that at that time, relatively few historical geographers appeared to be taking up discipline's storied human-environment interaction tradition. They feared that environmental perspectives in historical geography were being greatly outnumbered by a variety of other concerns. In their review of the field, Graham and Nash (2000, p.3) report:

"Recent work is moving in new directions. Many contemporary historical geographers informed by feminism, post-structuralism, anti-racism and post-colonial perspectives share concerns about power and meaning with other researchers more readily located within the traditional sub-disciplines of economic, cultural, political and social geography. . . . The

key themes evident in much recent work include: a more overtly theorized exploration of the material, political and symbolic dimensions of travel and exploration; imperialism and post-colonialism; nationhood and state formation; and ideas of nature and environmental change.”

To be sure, there has been some top-notch work by physical geographers interested in past environments (see Trimble 1992; Phillips 1997), as well as by environmental historians (Cronon 1991; White 1995). Indeed, Colten (1998, p.iv) refers to environmental historians “constructive interlopers.” Although Holdsworth (2002) initially contended that it is too early to tell if more modern perspectives in historical geography would completely erase traditional concerns of place, space, and environment—in a subsequent review of the field, Holdsworth (2004) acknowledges some fine environmental historical geography by a variety of scholars such as Walker (2001), Colten (2002), and Gandy (2002) among others. In fact, Dilsaver and Colten’s earlier fears that environmental issues appeared to be taking a back seat in historical geography proved premature. Writing the historical geography chapter in the massive *Geography in America* published in 2003, Colten et al. (p.153) contend “Without a doubt, the 1990s was a surging, successful decade for scholars with environmental interests.” To this we might add Dilsaver’s (2004) work on the Cumberland Island National Seashore or Colten’s (2005) *Unnatural Metropolis*, a timely discussion of New Orleans’ continuing struggle with their low lying environment, published just months before Hurricane Katrina devastated the northern Gulf coast.

Focus on Florida

Students of Florida’s past have written much about the state’s changing demographic patterns and developing collage of ethnic groups (Winsberg 1993; Lamme and Meindl 2002; and Mormino 2005) and some occasionally tip their hat to environmental issues (see Ganon 1996 and especially Tebeau 1980). Indeed, Ray Arenault and Gary Mormino launched the University Press of Florida’s *Florida History and Culture Series* almost ten years ago and have since overseen the publication of almost 40 volumes (and counting)

dealing with many aspects of Florida's past and present. A review of even the most important books in this series is beyond the scope of this paper, but quick mention of a handful of selected titles underscores the emergence of a literature devoted to an analysis of Florida's changing geographies.

David McCally's (1999) environmental history of the Everglades, Patsy West's (1998) treatment of Seminole Indians, and Mark Foster's (2000) book on Miami Beach developer Carl Fisher all illustrate the dramatic changes that have occurred in south Florida over the past century. Meanwhile, Gordon Patterson's (2004) analysis of Florida's war against mosquitoes, Faith Eidse's (2005) collection of interviews from people living near the Apalachicola River, and Bill Belleville's (2006) personal account of suburban sprawl's path across a chunk of central Florida all highlight environmental changes in other parts of Florida. Finally, Jack Davis and Raymond Arsenault (2005) edited a collection of essays attempting to examine selected aspects of Florida's environmental history while Gary Mormino (2005) produced a solid synthesis of late 20th century Florida social history that wonders aloud if the changes we are imposing on the state are truly sustainable over the long term.

Of course, there is an equally relevant and burgeoning literature that is NOT part of the *Florida History and Culture Series*. For example, Ary Lamme (1997) and Kevin Archer (1996a, 1996b, 1997a, 1997b, 1997c) have commented on growth and change in central Florida. Included among the more environmentally-oriented histories of at least a portion of Florida include Carter's (1975) now somewhat dated book on the development of Florida water policy, Nelson Blake's (1980) aptly named *Water into Land—Land into Water*, an examination of efforts to drain the Everglades and of the ill-fated attempt to create a cross Florida barge canal; and James Miller's 1998 *Environmental History of Northeast Florida*. To these we might add Belleville's (2000) discussion of the St. Johns River and Kathryn Ziewitz and June Wiaz's (2004) treatment of the transformation of Florida's largest landowner (St. Joe Company) from a forest products producer to real estate developer.

Conceptual Issues and Major Themes

The development of a historical geography of Florida requires confronting at least a few conceptual issues and themes. To begin with, although there are certainly historical geographical issues of interest prior to 1900 in many parts of Florida, the majority of physical and human geographical changes in the Sunshine State have taken place since 1900. To wit, Key West remained Florida's largest city until the state's census of 1895, and as late as 1900, scarcely more than a half million people inhabited the entire state (with more than half of those living along a string of north Florida counties between Jacksonville and Pensacola). Although there was some important late 19th century economic development in Florida (such as the railroad and hotel development by Henry Flagler and Henry Plant, as well as Hamilton Disston's drainage work), focus on the period since 1900 is appropriate.

In addition, we would almost certainly have to cope in some way with the economic consequences of massive population growth. For example, the explosion of tourism is widely touted as a positive development for Florida partly because it provides many jobs, and partly because it generates so much tax revenue that Florida remains one of a few states able to avoid adopting a state income tax. Yet for all of tourism's benefits, the related impacts of large numbers of poorly paid workers, and the fact that the state's tax revenue has not come close to providing the revenue necessary to support adequate transportation, education and other infrastructure suggests that the state is in some ways choking on its own growth. Indeed, it might prove fruitful to investigate the 20th century experience of other states for comparison to the Florida experience. For example, perhaps we can investigate the economic and environmental impacts of rapid growth in states like Hawaii or California and compare this with the consequences of slower growth in states such as West Virginia and North Dakota? Such comparisons would have to be handled with care, but they might help put the Florida experience into perspective.

Tackling the environmental consequences of the state's phenomenal population growth is equally important. Florida has been caught in a vicious circle: a pleasant natural environment (after hu-

man modifications such as wetland drainage, air conditioning and mosquito control), Florida's historically inexpensive housing (now a quickly fading dream!), no state income tax, and tourist attractions—all of these have all combined to attract large numbers of people who have both added to and reduced the quality of life that attracts people to Florida in the first place. From the brewing housing affordability crisis to awful traffic in urban areas, to all manner of environmental degradation—continued economic growth appears to be making many of these problems worse. At the same time, I remain painfully aware of Earle's (1992, p.53-54) warning to avoid the overly simplistic claims that "capitalism has mindlessly destroyed the landscape" and that "environmentalism will set things straight." Earle observes that such a dichotomy buries capitalism's occasional positive contributions under the environmental problems it may have helped create. For example, Earle (1992, p.54) found much "counterevidence of environmental wisdom and sensitivity" in late 19th and early 20th century residents of the U.S. South's Cotton Belt who apparently cared much more for their land than conventional wisdom suggests. Similarly, in 20th century Florida, one could start with the fact that wetland drainage—for all its negative attributes—contributed to an environment worth settling in the first place. Although destroying additional wetlands for development may not make much sense today—previous wetland drainage laid the foundation for many positive developments in Florida.

Of course, one could not address Florida's environmental historical geography without focusing on water, arguably the state's most attractive feature. This can be done in three contexts. First, fresh water for agricultural, industrial and domestic use, is the life-blood of the state. Roughly half of all the fresh water used in Florida comes from surface sources and the other half is drawn from the ground. Water shortages are becoming increasingly common despite the fact that the state averages over 50 inches of rain per year (Fernald and Purdum, 1998). The era of limitless and inexpensive ground and surface water appears to be nearing an end. Continued population growth in central and south Florida is now beginning to impose higher water costs because utilities must now tap more expensive

sources of water to meet the increasing demand—costs that are passed along to all residents in an area (whether they benefit from continued growth or not).

Continued population growth impacts Florida's fresh water resources in a variety of ways. For example, salt-water intrusion into coastal zone aquifers (due to excessive demands placed on coastal area groundwater supplies) was long ago documented in Miami and St. Petersburg (among other places). It is one thing for relatively wealthy coastal residents to have to pay more to import fresh water—but entirely another when the movement of large quantities of water from inland areas toward the coast may create impacts for inland areas (such as additional sinkholes; see Rand 2003). The impacts associated with the movement of large quantities of water across county lines cries out for more attention. Furthermore, although water quality problems in the Everglades have been much publicized, the decline (and in a few cases, recovery) of water quality in the rest of Florida has not been given the historical geographic attention it deserves. In addition, we need to better document the relative impacts of drought over time. One might be tempted to suggest that population growth in Florida has made drought far more problematic than it was in the past, but this has not been thoroughly analyzed. Finally, impacts of growth to Florida's fabled springs are slowly becoming manifest. Many of the state's smaller springs have long since gone dry due to increased groundwater pumping. Historical geographers might well attempt to trace impacts to Florida's remaining springs, recognizing that such work is complicated by the fact that many springs in one watershed depend on water that originates in another watershed.

The second context in which one could examine water in Florida is that of coastal waters (and to a lesser extent, lakes and rivers). Coasts, rivers and lakeshores represent Florida's "heart" and they have attracted the lion's share of the state's residents and tourists. Although most of north Florida's coastal salt marshes have until recently escaped the developer's bull dozer, many of south and central Florida's salt marshes and mangrove forests have long been converted to waterfront housing—as has much of Florida's beachfront property. Surely historical geographers can synthesize the many

documented impacts of coastal development to plant and animal species—as well as to people who once made a living on the coast, but who can no longer afford to live there. Finally, federal, state, and local governments subsidize property insurance against floods, hurricanes and other hazards, and they support beach nourishment programs, further encouraging the notion of “risk-free” development. Florida may be a subtropical paradise, but as the 2004 and 2005 hurricane seasons (and resulting property insurance crisis) remind us, our state periodically experiences extreme natural events. Moreover, now that the state is home to nearly 18 million people, natural hazards are now more likely than ever to impact large numbers of people, and the price tag for coping with such disasters is mounting. A historical geographical analysis of natural hazards and property insurance in Florida would help put the current property insurance crisis into perspective.

If freshwater represents Florida’s life-blood and coastal waters are Florida’s heart, wetlands (the third context of water in Florida) are the state’s “kidneys.” Dahl (1990) estimates that in the 1780s (long before virtually any wetland drainage took place), just over 20 million acres of Florida’s 34+ million acres of land area (almost 59%) was wetland. And in spite of the fact that people have converted roughly 9 million acres of Florida wetlands to farmland or urban uses, and although Florida contains thousands of miles of streams and thousands of lakes, “wetlands are [still] the largest component of the state’s surface waters in terms of total land area” (Fernald & Purdum 1998, p.77).

Wetlands are widely believed to provide a host of valuable services to people. According to Fernald & Patton (1984, p.249), “Loss of wetlands has been a major factor in the degradation of water quality, the decline of fishing and hunting, the reduction of water supply, and the increase in potential for flood damage experienced in many parts of the state.” These generalizations seem reasonable, but can we identify specific impacts of wetland loss in certain places? This is a crucial issue because this is where many environmentalists’ arguments fall apart: these impacts may be real, but they are generalizations that sometimes do not hold up to scrutiny in all cases (Meindl

2005). A historical geographic approach to this problem would call for an analysis of wetland losses in specific places and finding ways to determine if visible impacts are a result of wetland losses—or simply coincident with them.

Conclusion

Florida remains fertile terrain for historical geographers, particularly those interested in the consequences of significant population and economic growth over relatively short periods of time. Although one could make a case for examining Florida's geographies of the more distant past, I think a stronger case can be made for seeking to understand the state's human and physical geographies since 1900. Rapid development in Florida, especially over the past 60 years, has provided many benefits but it has created several problems as well. We need to abandon the blanket assumption that additional growth and development will always produce benefits in excess of problems and more thoroughly analyze what all these changes mean for people.

Meanwhile, although environmentalists frequently decry the loss of wetlands, increasing air and water pollution, increasing scarcity of water resources, and the relative decline in the quality of Florida's environment—all too often they do so in general, non-specific terms. Indeed, there has been no systematic and statewide attempt to carefully measure many of the environmental consequences of rapid population growth in Florida since 1900. It is my contention that we desperately need such an effort and environmentally oriented historical geography is, as Colten and Dilsaver (1992) suggested more than a decade ago, well suited to undertake such a task. The state's attractive environment is what draws people to Florida in the first place. Are we in danger of literally loving the state to death—or can we draw attention to the specific impacts of rapid population growth in time to foster more sustainable environmental management? Only time will tell.

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