

The Origin of Early Everglades Landowners

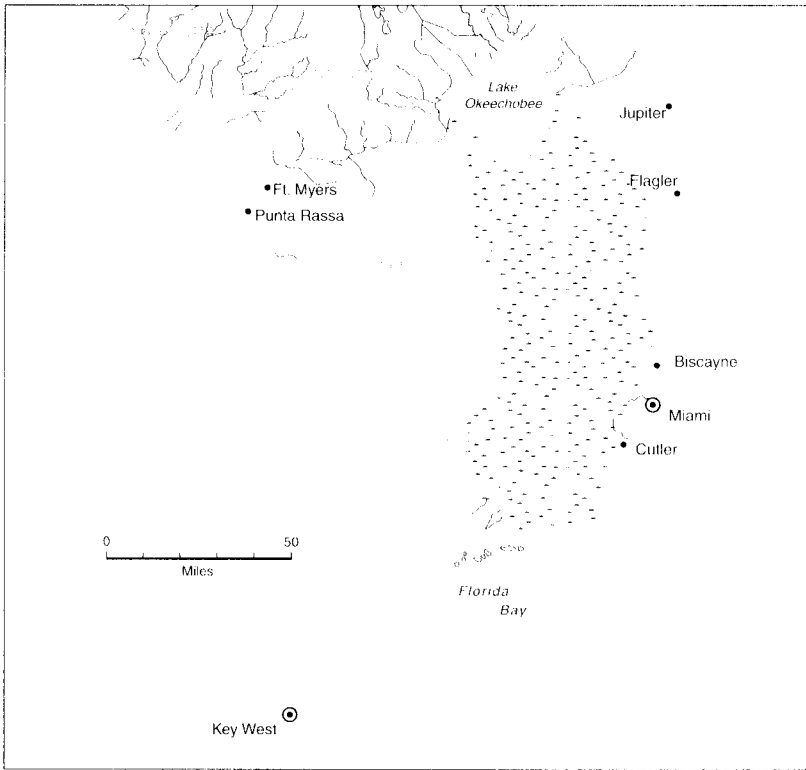
Christopher F. Meindl

Census takers in 1890 found less than 2,400 people on the Florida mainland south of Lake Okeechobee, and most of these were scattered in tiny hamlets along the coast (Figure 1; U.S. Department of the Interior 1895). Indeed, South Florida—dominated by the Everglades—remained a wetland wilderness until the Florida East Coast Railroad reached Miami in 1896. With the exception of a few hundred Seminole and Miccosukee Indians, very few people wandered into (let alone lived in) the Everglades. Florida gubernatorial candidate Napoleon B. Broward developed Everglades drainage as an issue in 1904 in an attempt to put political distance between himself and other candidates. Broward won the election, but as Brooks (1988 p.42) suggests, “in allowing the land [Everglades] question to dominate his speaking, Broward was faced with all the rhetorical liabilities surrounding the issue.” Serving as his own publicist, engineer, and construction superintendent, Florida Governor Napoleon Broward launched Everglades reclamation in July 1906 (Knetsch 1991).

By late December 1908, just before the end of Broward’s term as governor, two dredges had managed to cut just six miles of canals each and drained little land. Making matters worse, the state did not have enough money to continue the reclamation effort. In a desperate attempt to generate the cash needed to continue digging canals, Governor Broward sold real estate developer Richard J. Bolles a half million acres of Everglades swamp land for \$1 million. “This sale,” observes McCally (1999), “irrevocably committed the State of Florida to a specific drainage project even before the first engineering study regarding its feasibility appeared.” A handful of other real estate firms quickly followed suit, buying South Florida swampland and accepting Broward’s pledge that the state would soon drain the Everglades (Randolph 1917). These corporations immediately produced reams of advertising material and they opened real estate offices both in and out of Florida in order to sell the cheaply acquired

Dr. Meindl is an assistant professor of geography at Georgia College & State University in Milledgeville, GA 31061

Figure 1



wetlands for profit. The *Miami News-Record* (31 December 1908, p.2) noted that “for the past two years most strenuous endeavors have been made to dispose of the Everglade lands, and the result has been, so far as can be ascertained, that less than two hundred acres have been sold to actual settlers, while land corporations have secured control of about two million acres.”

By 1912, however, more than 14,000 lots had been sold in the Everglades (McCalley 1999). Who bought this property and more importantly, where did they come from? The purpose of this paper is to present evidence suggesting where these people came from. Most early Everglades land buyers were not from Florida or even from neighboring states in the South, and many purchased land before they had even seen it. Miami resident Margaret Topham wrote U.S. Department of Agriculture Secretary James Wilson on 13 November 1910 summarizing what she witnessed:

Can not this department take some measure to force the stoppage of sales of so-called drained Everglades lands? Not a day [goes by] but some poor, deluded victim arrives here in Miami to find the acres which he has bought, and which have been described to him as a very gold mine for productiveness, sometimes as much as 8 feet under water, and with no present prospect for that water disappearing. These land companies are flooding the country, particularly the Middle West, with the most fabulous misrepresentations. We who live here know how absolutely cruel the sufferings of those misguided creatures. The Everglades may be drained some day, but that day has not arrived (as quoted in U.S. House of Representatives 1912, p.1263).

The failure of early 20th century attempts to drain the Everglades generated a howl of protest among new landowners who had been promised that the Glades would soon be turned into an agricultural paradise. This led to a Congressional investigation in 1912 that exposed questionable but not illegal activity in South Florida (U.S. House of Representatives 1912).

Although South Florida has since become a haven for people born in foreign countries and people from the northeast U.S. (Winsberg 1993), Margaret Topham believed that many early Glades buyers came from the Midwest. Is this true? The *New York Times* certainly thought so. In early 1912, the *New York Times* (28 Jan 1912 p.14) reported, "much of the region has been platted and sold to prospective settlers, who number about 3,000 and hail largely from the Middle West." Even by 1912, there were far more than 3,000 Everglades landowners, but this newspaper's impression that many of them came from the Midwest is indeed accurate. Real estate companies attempting to sell land in the Everglades made no attempt to hide the identity of their purchasers. Some of the promotional literature contains testimonials of customers, or at the very least, a letter of endorsement with the names of people who allegedly visited the Glades and who agree with the rosy picture portrayed by the real estate community. In at least three cases, the state of residence of the endorser is listed next to their name.¹ Using data from three promotional brochures suggests that the overwhelming majority of Everglades buyers claimed to be Midwesterners (133); a few hailed from the Northeastern states (11); a few more from the West (10); and just three lived in the South.

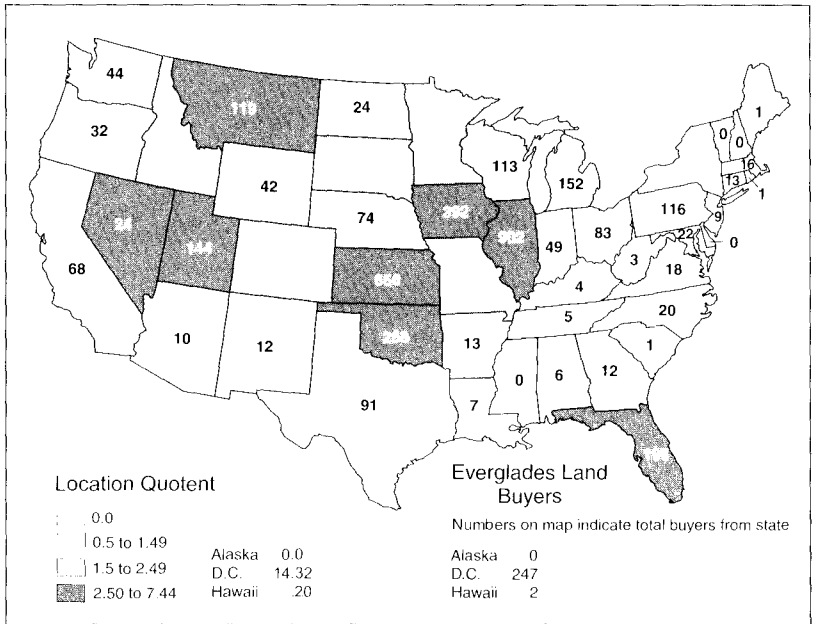
As the Congressional investigation of 1912 cast a pall over the Everglades reclamation project, the State of Florida invited several members of the press to take a tour of the region with then Governor Albert W. Gilchrist and other Florida officials. The tour was part of a celebration of the opening of the North New River Canal in April 1912. In conjunction with the Chambers Land Company, Chicago newspaperman William Larkin (1912) prepared a small booklet containing letters endorsing the Everglades from virtually all of those invited to participate on the journey across South Florida from Fort Myers up the Caloosahatchee River Canal to Lake Okeechobee, and down the recently completed North New River Canal to Fort Lauderdale. Only one media representative on this tour hailed from outside the Midwest and he was from Baltimore.

Perhaps the most insightful piece of evidence indicating the origin of many early 20th century Everglades land buyers is a manuscript prepared by early Everglades pioneer John Newhouse (no date). Entitled *1912 Land Buyer's Convention West Palm Beach, Florida*, this essay is based on a booklet published by the Florida Everglades Land Company. Newhouse's manuscript contains important geographic information: it lists the number of conventioners from each state in the U.S. as well as those from foreign countries.

Heiney (1978) and George (1989) discussed the details of a similar convention in 1911 at Ft. Lauderdale. Nearly 3,000 conventioners assembled at the sleepy, South Florida village of just 150 people in March 1911. Like other land companies, the Florida Fruit Lands Company sold contracts to purchase at least ten and up to 640 acres of land in the Glades for the set price of \$240. Buyers were attracted by the possibility of receiving one of the few 640-acre plots at the lottery in Ft. Lauderdale. Since the Everglades had not yet been surveyed, however, no one knew the exact location of individual purchases. This caused much dissatisfaction when it finally became known that many tracts were isolated and under water.

In any event, 4,805 Everglades buyers attended the 1912 West Palm Beach convention and Figure 2 demonstrates that there were more Midwesterners than people from any other region. Illinois, Kansas, Iowa, Missouri, and Minnesota accounted for over half the people present. One might have expected that Everglades buyers would hail from Florida and states closest to Florida. This did not happen. Of course, one might be able to explain the distribution of Everglades buyers in terms of the population of states; perhaps the Everglades attracted more buyers from states with more people.

Figure 2



To test this hypothesis, a location quotient (LQ) was determined for each state (using the data from Newhouse). According to Barber (1988), the location quotient is an index for comparing an area's share of a particular activity with the area's share of some basic phenomenon. In this case the "particular activity" is the share of the nation's purchasers of Everglades buyers from an individual state and the "basic phenomenon" is that state's share of the nation's total population in 1910 (the nearest decennial census). The location quotient expressed as an equation is found below:

Location Quotient =

$$\frac{\text{(Number of Glades Buyers from State X/Total Number of Glades Buyers)}}{\text{(Population of State X/Population of the United States)}}$$

For example, South Dakota had 57 of the 4,805 Everglades purchasers at the West Palm Beach gathering (.011863 percent) and 583,888 of the nation's 92,228,891 people (.00632 percent). Dividing South Dakota's share of the nation's population into its share of the nation's Everglades buyers gives a location quotient of 1.87. This

means that South Dakota supplied almost twice as many Everglades buyers at the 1912 convention in West Palm Beach as one might expect based on the state's population. Location quotients were calculated for all states and the District of Columbia, and have been displayed cartographically in Figure 2.

In spite of their relative proximity, almost all states east of the Mississippi River—even Florida's immediate neighbors—contributed proportionally fewer Everglades buyers than expected based on their total populations. Indeed, none of the southeastern states (except Florida) has a location quotient of higher than 0.17. On the other hand, most Western and Midwestern states supplied more than their share of early 20th century Everglades buyers. Florida is the only Southern state to produce proportionally more Everglades buyers relative to its population, but this makes sense because the Glades are in Florida. Although Floridians who were born in the South (including Florida) may have contributed to the state's relatively large number of Everglades purchasers (Florida LQ = 4.9), Figure 2 suggests that perhaps Floridians who previously migrated from more northern or Midwestern states were the "Floridians" buying land in the Glades.

Finally, Washington, D.C. led the nation with a location quotient of over 14—reflecting the work of Thomas Will and his friends (Meindl 2000 and Dovel 1948). Will, former president of what later became Kansas State University, not only purchased land in the Everglades—he helped organize the Florida Everglades homebuilders Association, a group of investors in Glades real estate. He engaged in much promotional activity in Washington from 1909 until he moved to South Florida in late 1914.

The question remains, why did so many Midwesterners buy land in the Everglades (or why were they targeted by advertisers)? Perhaps the more frontier-oriented residents of the West and Midwest viewed the Everglades as a "last frontier." After all, Frederick Jackson Turner had recently declared an end to the frontier in the western United States (Turner 1894). Early Everglades pioneer R.H. Little (1938) is perhaps representative. Little recalled becoming interested in the Everglades as a result of reading several newspaper and magazine articles while living in Chicago. He and his wife were nearing retirement and they decided to buy land and move to the Everglades so they could enjoy an outdoor lifestyle throughout the year. The prospect of settling raw country such as the Everglades did not bother Little (1938 p.7) or his wife: "we had experienced pioneering conditions on the prairies of the Northwest, where her

parents and I had seen the wilderness develop into a prospering community, with modern conveniences, within a period of ten years." There were undoubtedly many more Westerners and Midwesterners who felt the same way.

Moreover, Midwestern farmers had recently experienced success in converting that region's wetlands into productive farmland, so perhaps many people from the Midwest assumed that the same could be done in the Everglades (Prince 1997). Of course, such an undertaking represented a substantial investment, but the necessary capital remained in short supply throughout most of the post Civil War South. In addition, it may be that Midwesterners were targeted as potential landowners in the Glades because they were far removed from the reality of South Florida's Great American Wetland, and that Southerners—even if they would have had the capital—simply knew better than to attempt farming on wetlands that were not yet drained. Along these lines, the *Miami Metropolis* (1 March 1912, p.2) reprinted a generally favorable editorial regarding Florida that originally appeared in the *Cincinnati Enquirer*. Yet near the end of this piece, even this commentator expressed concern over the Glades: "Florida has so much good, rich land that requires no draining . . . that the State and its people have undoubtedly suffered great injury through attempts to unload upon unwary customers land that is in no condition to produce at this time."

In the end, it was probably a combination of variables that led to the unusual interest among Midwesterners in the Everglades. The real estate community recognized these variables and then generated a marketing and advertising blitz that rivaled modern efforts on Madison Avenue. When investors in Everglades land could not earn a return on their investment, many either sold out or simply quit making payments on their mortgages. At the beginning of the 20th century, few people owned land in the Everglades; and so it is today, with a large percentage of Everglades property owned either by the State or Federal government, or by a small handful of corporate farmers.

References

- Barber, Gerald M. (1988) *Elementary Statistics for Geographers*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Brooks, James Thomas (1988) "Napoleon Broward and the Great Land Debate". *Broward Legacy* 11:40-44.

- Dovell, J.E. (1948) "Thomas Elmer Will, twentieth century pioneer". *Tequesta* 8:21-55.
- George, Paul S. (1989) "Land by the Gallon: the Florida Fruitlands Company and the Progresso Land Lottery of 1911." *South Florida History Magazine*. Spring: 8-9.
- Heiney, A.U. (1978) Land lottery. *Broward Legacy*. 1(4):16-22.
- Knetsch, Joe (1991) "Governor Broward and the Details of Dredging: 1908." *Broward Legacy* 14:38-44.
- Larkin, William L. (1912) *Investigation of the Everglades*. Kansas City, MO: Chambers Land Company.
- Little, R.H. (1938) "Pioneering in the Everglades," unpublished manuscript. Jacksonville, FL: Works Progress Administration.
- McCally, D. (1999) *The Everglades: An Environmental History*. Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida.
- Meindl, C.F. (2000) "Past perceptions of the Great American Wetland: Florida's Everglades during the Early 20th Century". *Environmental History* 5: 378-395.
- Newhouse, John. (no date) "1912 Land Buyer's Convention West Palm Beach, Florida." Unpublished manuscript available at the P.K. Yonge Library of Florida History at the University of Florida, Gainesville, FL.
- Prince, Hugh (1997) *Wetlands of the American Midwest*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Randolph, I. (1917) "Reclaiming the Everglades of Florida." *Journal of the Franklin Institute* 184: 49-72.
- Turner, Frederick Jackson (1894) *Annual Report of the American Historical Association for 1893*. Washington, D.C.: American Historical Association, pp.199-227.
- U.S. Department of Commerce and Labor, Bureau of the Census. 1914. *Thirteenth Census of the United States: Abstract*. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office.

U.S. Department of the Interior, Census Office. 1895. *Report on Population of the United States at the Eleventh Census: 1890*. Part 1. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office.

U.S. House of Representatives, 62nd Congress, 2nd Session. 1912. *Hearings before the Committee on Expenditures in the Department of Agriculture: Florida Everglades Investigation*. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office.

Winsberg, Morton D. (1993) "The Changing South: Regional Migration Streams to Different Parts of Florida." *Southeastern Geographer*. 33: 110-121.

¹Three real estate companies put together advertising brochures that are available at the P.K. Yonge Library of Florida History at the University of Florida, Gainesville, FL; 1. The Palm Beach Farms Company (untitled); 2. The Florida Everglades Land Company (Little Journeys to the Everglades); 3. The Everglades Land Sales Company (Where Nature Smiles). Although no publication date is listed, brochures from all three companies appear to have been produced in 1910 or 1911.