

Magnolia: The Hamlins' Dream, Over Before They Woke Up

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Misfortune, bad luck and fate cannot be credited for the Hamlins' dream of a Southern Utopia at the St. Mark's River, nor its unfortunate demise. When the Hamlin Brothers landed at Magnolia's future site on July 4, 1827, they did not consult a geographer or even a surveyor prior to investing in the dream that was headed for destruction before they realized their lack of geographic awareness and planning (Tallahassee Democrat 1975).

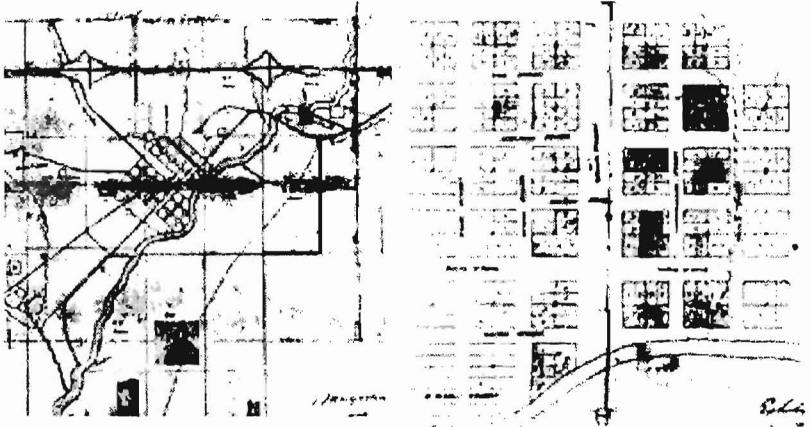
When it comes to the topic of Magnolia, Florida, confusion and fragmented facts are not unusual. Yet those occasional stories one hears or accidental stumblings onto the only remaining relic feature, the Magnolia graveyard, seem to fascinate Florida lore fanatics of all kinds. In fact it seems that the Magnolia graveyard, with its snakes and overgrown brush, is one of the best kept secrets that adventurous Florida buffs set out to explore.

Regardless of the historic account that references Magnolia, they all agree that the development of the railroad from Tallahassee to St. Mark's built in 1835 and the position of the port at St. Mark's at the mouth of the St. Mark's river played a significant role in the premature death of what the Hamlins hoped would be the major shipping and resort center of the South (Upchurch 1971). If one explores the various records, surveys and historic accounts, it is possible to propose a more complexed combination of factors that contributed to the demise of Magnolia. If only the Hamlins would have read their land and seascape more carefully, they may have selected another more appropriate site for their shipping and resort develop-

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ment. Middle Florida of the late 1820s offered a variety of locations more suitable and in some cases just a matter of a mile or two south or west of the site they selected. Some may ask why they did settle, stay and in some cases die here. Consideration should also be given to the specific site and situation of 1827 Magnolia before concluding on the contributing factors of this still disputed ghost town of Florida.



Magnolia and Vicinity, 1830

Since much of the character a settlement develops comes from its founding fathers, it is only right to develop a sketch of the Hamlin family heritage. The examination of the following 1827 advertisement which ran in papers from Pensacola to Augusta, Maine, reveals a great deal about the Hamlin family:

“Lots in the new town of Magnolia are offered for sale. This place is situated 8 miles from Port St. Mark’s on the St. Mark’s River and 15 miles from Tallahassee. The river can be navigated to the town by vessels drawing 8 feet of water. The situation is High, dry, and healthy. It has two sulphur springs in the vicinity, one of which is only 200 yards from the public square. They are said to possess great medical qualities. For further terms, etc. apply to J., G., and N. Hamlin, St. Mark’s, and Augustus Steele, Tallahassee” (Magnolia Monthly 1965).

These ambitious entrepreneurs were not only early real estate salesmen, but successful business men from Augusta, Maine. Their

professions ranged from mercantile owners and operators to cotton shippers, so the real estate development of Magnolia was not the only money making venture that they undertook (Dovell 1952). The Hamlins were not alone in the development of Magnolia. The other prominent name found in the Magnolia cemetery associated with 1830s-1860s Middle Florida was Ladd (Smith 1966; Magnolia Monthly 1967; Shofner 1978).

For three hundred years prior coming to Florida, the Hamlins and Ladds had intermarried and became known as two of the wealthiest and most enterprising families in Maine, as well as in Florida (Tallahassee Democrat 1975). In fact, years after the last inhabitant left Magnolia the names of Hamlin and Ladd are cited in numerous business contracts and accounts, even the DeBows Review.

With this reputation and wealth to back them, it was only natural that other prominent Northerners would consider making the trip to the high, dry and healthy Magnolia (Magnolia Monthly 1972). Unfortunately these businessmen were not trained geographers or even cautious planners and it was only a matter of time before their lack of planning would begin to surface. A situation that exemplifies this problem was a surveyor's citation from the U.S. War Department in 1828. In an article by Mr. Cash of the Tallahassee Historical Society he proposes, "It may have been the influence of Progressive Magnolias that caused the U.S. War Department in 1828 to have a survey made of the St. Mark's River." On September 11, 1828, Chief Engineer David B. Malcomb in charge, determined that a vessel drawing over six feet would have to lighten its load to get to Magnolia (US War Department 1828). Mr. Cash seemed to feel that by pushing for the survey, without prior knowledge of the water depth, was a costly mistake. This seemed to be corroborated by the inconsistent findings of the survey and this advertisement in the Magnolia Advertiser, the local newspaper. In the second day of printing, Mr. Steele, the editor, provides the following description of Magnolia:

MAGNOLIA

The Proprietors of the Town of Magnolia offer for sale, all the remaining Lots in said Town. Eligible situations for private dwellings, Stores and Ware Houses.

The first improvements in this Town were made one year since, it now contains 200 inhabitants, 40 houses occupied as dwellings, Stores and Ware houses, besides other out houses, many others are still building, 9 respectable Mercantile establish-

ments are in full operation, two Public Houses of entertainment, a Weekly Newspaper; it has a Weekly mail from Tallahassee; a good spring, Well and River water for family's use: the situation high dry and healthy- as the past season has established beyond a doubt. It has extensive country trade with the interior of this Territory, and the State of Georgia: 2 regular Packet vessels run monthly to New Orleans, it also carries on a regular trade with N. York and other Northern Cities.

This town is situated in Middle Florida, Leon County, nine miles from the Gulf of Mexico at the head of the navigation on the St. Marks River, five and a half miles N. E. from Fort St. Marks: sixteen miles S. S.E. from Tallahassee: North latitude 30d 14m *accessible to vessels drawing eight and a half feet of water*

TERMS

One fourth part of the purchase money paid down, the remainder in twelve months. Warantee [sic] deeds given on the receipt of the last payment. The TITLE undoubtedly, founded on United States, PATENTS dated November 1st 1827.

J., G., & N. HAMLIN

Magnolia, December 12, 1828 (Magnolia Advertiser 1828)

Note that the town's harbor is reported to accommodate ships that draw eight and a half feet of water. Thus the surveyor's findings contradict the article. Another planning flaw surfaced when two primary transportation links failed to connect Magnolia with the two most important trade destinations, St. Marks and Tallahassee. Tallahassee trade was considered essential to the success of Magnolia as a trade center, yet neither the Hamlins or other founding investors investigated future plans for transportation routes out of Tallahassee (Petty 1989). In 1833, the first bridge over the St. Marks was completed. It was built approximately a half a mile north of Magnolia and passable by carriage. The bridge connected the road from Monticello south to the road just west of the St. Marks River which ran north to Tallahassee and south to Magnolia (Smith 1968). This seemed to provide hope for traffic flow in Magnolia's direction. Unfortunately, in 1835, Tallahassee financiers built a railroad directly to St. Marks which by-passed Magnolia altogether (Tallahassee Democrat 1975). This increased the rivalry for trade along the St. Marks and with its more viable harbor and direct access to the Gulf of Mexico, St. Marks was sure to win over the wisest shippers and merchants. The Hamlins were working out of St. Marks when they

began advertising for settlers in Magnolia. They put themselves in direct competition with the intention of making Magnolia the major port, not St. Marks. The Hamlins were shrewd businessmen. In their few short years, they managed to petition for a lighthouse at the mouth of the St. Marks River. The Tallahassee Legislative Council incorporated the Merchants and Planters Bank of Magnolia with a capitalization of \$300,000 and their own currency. They established a school and advertised for tuition, petitioned Washington D.C. for a post office and port of entry with a customs house and tried to secure their holdings in Magnolia by taking advantage of January 16, 1828 Law; section three, that stated, "Sec. 3. And be it further enacted, That whosoever shall fall any tree or trees, or cause the same to be felled, into any navigable stream within this Territory, and shall not remove the same within 24 hours after such felling shall forfeit and pay five dollars for every tree felled as aforesaid to be recovered with cost before any account having jurisdiction of the same." The next paragraph in the article informs the reader that J., G. and N. Hamlin plan to prosecute anyone who shall in any way impede the navigation of the St. Marks River (Magnolia Monthly 1965). It seems that the Hamlins were ready to pay in order to secure a clear south channel on the St. Marks (Smith 1968; Cash 1944; Magnolia Monthly 1965).

Even with all of these attempts to solidify their investment, Magnolia was never meant to be. Not only did the location of the railroad shift travelers' attention to St. Marks, but by 1834 the custom house was relocated. Along with the customs house went much of the shipping (Magnolia Monthly 1972).

The 200 inhabitants of Magnolia were faced with more than just a transportation dilemma. Logically one could argue that it was a combination of factors that finally sealed the fate of Magnolia. The yellow fever epidemic, in 1835, killed many while others, for fear of an illegal purchase of property, packed up house and all their belongings and moved away. The latter incident was caused by some confusion over the Forbes purchase and the U. S. Supreme Court invalidation there of (Magnolia Monthly 1972).

In the case of Magnolia, a study in respect to site and situation, provides overwhelming geographic explanations to the doomed existence of what was once considered Hamlins' City of the Future, the place to stay high, dry and healthy. Unfortunately, that dream was all washed up. If one considers the geographic misfortune of the planned mule tram (railroad) and the lack of water depth necessary (Morris 1974) to compete as a port, these problems alone

would discourage any reasonable future resident. Combining St. Marks's close proximity to the bay with the Forbes Purchase controversy, it is obvious that it was more than poor transportation planning that stopped this dream from becoming a reality.

Where would I go next?

If carrying this farther, one might go to neighboring town newspapers, archaeological survey findings, shipping records not only from Florida at the time, but New Orleans and Maine, the Forbes Purchase, a closer look at the Plank Road and Mule tram plans, records from Augusta, Maine from Hamlin and Ladd businesses, surveys, ordinances and legal actions taken in that time and part of Florida. So much to do, so little time, it is an interesting and addicting topic that has so many possibilities for study.

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A Historical Geography Field Project

Grade Level: Middle or High School students who study Florida

Main Objectives:

Introduce students to the skill of historical and geographic research

Give students the opportunity to take part in a real life historical geography study

Give students the opportunity to observe, speculate, analyze and evaluate the data that they collect

Materials: Access to a good library or inter-library loan service, transportation to the site of Magnolia (at least 1 trip), the Magnolia paper titled "Magnolia: The Hamlins' Dream, Over Before They Woke Up"

Time frame: At least a week or as long as a year, working on their research periodically in class

Procedures:

1. Introduce the concept of historical geography research to the class: OSAE process will be used, which stands for Observe, Speculate, Analyze and Evaluate their field findings.

2. Have them practice using OSAE by taking them on a short walk around the school and school grounds. While they are walking ask them to observe as much as they can noting things that they see, touch, hear and smell. Remind them to begin to speculate why things are the way they are and how they became that way.

3. After the short practice walk, have the students quickly record their observations and speculations from the walk and share them with a classmate or two. In the small groups ask the students to compare notes and analyze their findings. Have groups share their findings and as a class evaluate the overall findings for consistency and accuracy.

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4. Explain to the class that this is the same set of skills that they are going to use when they study the lost city of Magnolia. Let them know that they will be using a variety of sources and locations to research the lost city. Let them know that they will need to go to libraries, property appraisers, insurance offices, historic museums, newspapers, and the actual site of the old city.
5. Brainstorm a list of questions that they would want to have answered through their research. List should include: Where was the site of the city? What is there now? What happened to it? Why was it a success originally and later a disaster? What events contributed to its successes and failures? What geographic features contributed to its success and failures? What do we know about the people of Magnolia? Where are their descendants today?
6. Brainstorm a list of resources and places they can search to find out about Magnolia. Give the students the bibliography from the Magnolia paper and discuss possible places to find this information. Working with the students in pairs, talk to them about generating a list of questions they want answered about Magnolia and how they plan to get the information.
7. Line up visits to the places that seem viable for information starting with the library, property appraisers office and historic society.
8. Once the students have generated their list of questions about the place for each of the offices or libraries send them to begin their research.
9. Once written materials have been explored, suggest a time to visit the site where Magnolia once stood. Have students once again brainstorm what they should be observing and what resources could they take advantage of at the site. (You may want to go to the site in advance to familiarize yourself with the graveyard, the remaining families who still live in the area and arrange to let the students interview some of the families. When the original research was done, the families were very helpful and full of stories.)
10. The day of the site visit, review what we know so far about Magnolia and remind students of OSAE. Make sure they bring their field notes and questions for those they meet in the area.

11. Continue the research from leads or other resources the students may think of till they feel they have a good grasp of where Magnolia was, what kind of town it was, why it was originally successful and later a failure. When you have collect the students field work and reports on what they have found, you may then want to bring closure to the research by sharing the Magnolia paper so they can compare their findings to that of the researcher.

12. Their final activity could be to draw comparisons between their work and that of the researcher and suggest new places to look for further material just as the researcher did.

Evaluation: Their participation in the project and written work.