

Frank Stoneman and the Florida Everglades During the Early 20th Century

Christopher F. Meindl

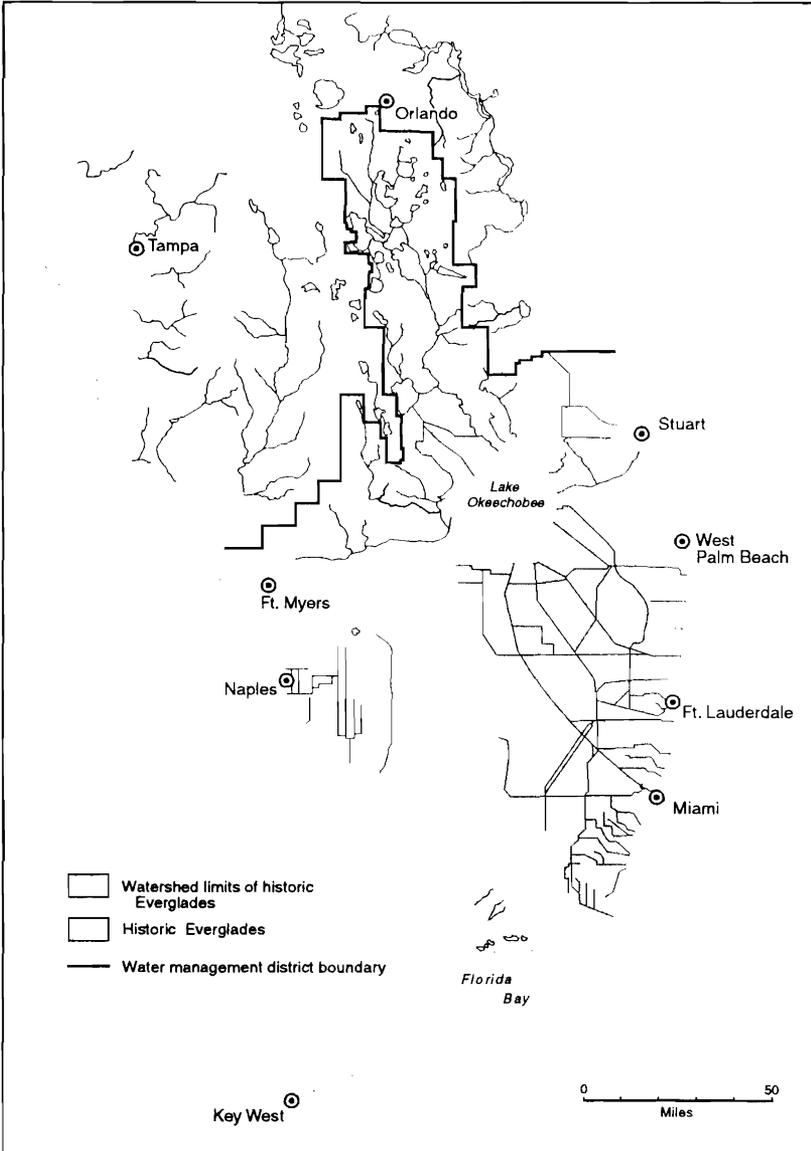
Introduction

Marjory Stoneman Douglas has long been associated with the Everglades preservation movement (Douglas 1947). Recent rumblings that we should “save the Everglades” represent only the latest round of a century-long debate regarding land use in South Florida (Fig. 1). The debate began in earnest during the 1904 Florida gubernatorial campaign when Napoleon B. Broward (who won the election) suggested that the State drain the Everglades, opening southern Florida to agricultural development (Patton 1992). Marjory’s father, Frank B. Stoneman, expressed reservations regarding Broward’s plan to drain the Everglades (or simply, “Glades”). Indeed, Frank Stoneman wrote a series of editorials chronicling his opinion of the Glades during the early 1900s.

Many geographers are interested in people’s perceptions of environments because perceptions help govern how people use the land around them (Aitken et al 1989). Furthermore, some historical geographers investigate landscapes of the past as a way of studying changes in people’s thoughts as they express them on the land (Guelke 1982; Dilsaver and Colten 1992). For many early 20th century people, “progress” meant converting unused land into productive farmland. Yet agricultural production in the Glades would be impossible without some system of drainage. Frank Stoneman’s perceptions of the Everglades shed light on how he, and perhaps others, viewed this wetland environment during the early 1900s when the decision was made to drain the Glades. In this case, previous perceptions of the Everglades are examined as a way of understanding land use decisions of the past, many of which have created problems for future generations. This article

Dr. Christopher F. Meindl teaches in the Department of Geography. Weber State University, Ogden, Utah 84408.

Figure 1
Historic Everglades and Current Canal Structure



relies heavily upon editorials appearing in early issues of the *Miami Herald* and its predecessors. Frank Stoneman not only helped establish these newspapers, he served as their editor, and it is assumed here that he wrote the editorials cited.

The Everglades

Because South Florida has been radically altered since 1900, it is important to create a mental image of the landscape prior to drainage and development. The Everglades are the southern extension of a hydrologic system that begins in Central Florida near the headwaters of the Kissimmee River (Fig. 1). The Kissimmee drains the northern most section of the South Florida Water Management District and it used to meander slowly in a southerly direction eventually emptying into the north shore of Lake Okeechobee. In an effort to prevent flooding along the Kissimmee, much of the river has since been converted into a far deeper, wider, and straighter canal that quickly ushers water from Central Florida into Lake Okeechobee. Subsequent ecological problems have led the South Florida Water Management District to fill parts of the canal and return portions of the Kissimmee River to some semblance of its pre-1900 existence (Toth 1993).

The next component of this system is Lake Okeechobee, the second largest freshwater lake entirely in the United States. Before being surrounded by a dike in the 1930s, it was relatively shallow, generally less than 25 feet deep. Since the elevation of the land surrounding Okeechobee's north shore was originally 10 to 15 feet higher than land on the south shore, excess water frequently overflowed the lake's southern bank and oozed toward the Everglades (Brooks 1984; Gunter 1913). Indeed, early drainage officials quickly recognized the necessity of controlling water levels in Lake Okeechobee in order to drain the Everglades (U.S. Senate 1911).

Excess lake water periodically spilled over Lake Okeechobee's southern bank on to the Everglades, a huge freshwater marsh that gently led water from the lake toward Florida Bay at the southern end of the state (Fig. 1). Although South Florida was a predominantly wetland environment in 1900, the Everglades represented a slight depression in south central Florida's topography. Southeast Florida is lined by the Atlantic Coastal Ridge, a five to ten mile wide ridge of coralline rock approximately 20 to 30 feet above sea level and extending from north of West Palm Beach to south of Miami. Even before drainage, this ridge was punctured by several short rivers formed by excess water from the Everglades headed toward the Atlantic Ocean.

Early drainage efforts revolved around using these streams as outlets for drainage canals which were cut across the Glades up to Lake Okeechobee (Fig. 1). The western half of Florida south of Lake Okeechobee is dominated by the Big Cypress Swamp—a wetland only slightly higher than the neighboring Everglades (McPherson 1984). The Everglades may appear perfectly flat and uniform but they are not. Topographic variation in the Glades is not dramatic, but it is vital in creating slightly different hydrologic conditions across space, which allow a wide variety of plants and animals to coexist.

Much of the Everglades is underlain by limestone that is buried by several feet of histosols, soils dominated by organic material. It would be a mistake, however, to assume that soil depth is uniform throughout the Glades, or that drainage had no impact upon such soil. Not only are soils much deeper in the northern and central Glades, drainage has served as an open invitation to aerobic bacteria which are rapidly consuming the organic soil. At the turn of the century, elevations immediately south of Lake Okeechobee were just over 20 feet above sea level; today they are no more than 14 feet above sea level (Stephens 1984). It was this environment that Florida officials tried to convert into an agricultural paradise shortly after 1900.

Frank Stoneman & the Everglades

Born in 1857, Frank Stonemen moved to Florida in the 1890s, and made his way to Miami in 1903 where he helped establish a newspaper that later became known as the *Miami Herald* (*Miami Herald*, 21 July 1911, p.46). Frank's daughter Marjory later remembered that her father had always been attracted to the frontier. He spent most of his early years in Minnesota and Montana (Douglas 1987), and turn of the century South Florida was every bit as much a frontier. The 1900 census reveals that Dade County, which in those days occupied the eastern half of Florida from just north of Lake Okeechobee to the southern end of the peninsula, had less than 5,000 souls. The same region had over 4.1 million residents in 1990 and the area's population continues to grow.

Like most early 20th century Floridians, Frank Stoneman probably gave little thought to the Everglades until Governor Broward led the charge to drain them. Although Stoneman eventually raised serious questions regarding the wisdom of such a project, his initial reaction appears to have been positive. For example, a front-page editorial in the 10 October 1905 edition of the *Miami Evening Record* (predecessor to the *Miami Herald*) suggests that

much of the Everglades could be drained if the region were served by a series of canals of sufficient capacity.

Stoneman was proud of those who attempted to settle South Florida and this included those who did so in wetlands. Indeed, he defended the governor's drainage plans in an editorial appearing on 3 April 1906 (*Miami Evening Record*, p. 4). Referring to the 1850 Swamp Lands Act in which the Federal Government gave Florida swamp and overflowed lands for the purpose of draining them, Stoneman observed: "The governor is simply carrying out the provisions of the law and is doing it in the most business like and direct way." He commented favorably on Broward's drainage plan and echoed the governor's belief that the Glades would soon become valuable for sugar production. Stoneman even went so far as to criticize those who questioned the drainage project: "And yet there are those," the editor concluded, "who pose as enterprising and loyal citizens of the state who would obstruct this great enterprise." Later that month, Stoneman accused north Florida newspapers of fomenting opposition to Broward's drainage plan: "The sentiment is manufactured and the factory is located in Jacksonville" (*Miami Evening Record*, 28 April 1906, p.4)

By late October 1906, however, Stoneman began to question Broward's plan for Everglades drainage. He appears to have been strongly influenced by people who wrote him and suggested that there may be serious consequences associated with draining the Glades. For example, Stoneman received a letter dated 25 October 1906 from Alfred Newlander, a civil engineer from St. Augustine who claimed to be involved in drainage projects in other parts of Florida (this letter was published on the front page of the *Miami Evening Record* for 27 October 1906). Newlander prepared a detailed critique of proposed drainage operations in the Glades and argued that it would take far longer, and cost far more, to drain the region than Florida officials contended. Furthermore, he insisted that the planned canals were not of sufficient capacity to adequately drain the Everglades. Newlander concluded with the suggestion that the tremendous volume of water in the Everglades served to moderate what might otherwise be chilly winter weather. The impact of this letter upon Stoneman's thought was immediate. In a 25 October 1906 editorial, Stoneman wrote: "It is certain that if the theory that large bodies of water have a beneficial effect on temperature, that the taking away of large areas of it will have the opposite effect" (*Miami Evening Record*, p.2).

Meanwhile, Governor Broward asked the U.S. Department of Agriculture for help with the project and it responded by ordering James O. Wright to prepare a report on the technical and economic feasibility of draining the Everglades. Stoneman appeared content to let Wright and his crew investigate, but Broward continued digging what later became known as the North New River Canal, extending from the North New River at Fort Lauderdale to the southern shore of Lake Okeechobee (Fig. 1). By 8 February 1908, Stoneman again became aroused over Everglades drainage: "The ardent advocates of the drainage of the Everglades show a lamentable ignorance of conditions in this section of the state...These advocates do not take into consideration the fact that there is now existing a large deficit in the rainfall for the past 15 months, and ascribe to the drainage operations that which has really been the result of an unprecedented drought" (*Miami Morning News-Record*, 5 February 1908, p.2). He repeated his fear that drainage may reduce the environment's ability to moderate winter weather. Yet Stoneman also made clear that he was no foe of progress: "The News-Record is not opposed to the drainage of the Everglades if draining them will extend the area of arable land, and will not destroy the production of vegetables and citrus fruits now grown here, but it does believe that the great problem should be carefully investigated by experts and scientists before much money is spent or possible irreparable damage incurred." Stoneman reiterated this theme in a 19 August 1908 editorial: "No one in this section of the state opposes the drainage of small portions of the Everglades at a time, and experiments carried on as to what may be raised on the land thus drained. On the contrary, every intelligent effort of that kind is warmly welcomed" (*Miami Morning News-Record*, p.2).

Stoneman's newspaper reported that Miami received 15.39 inches of rain during the first five days of October 1908 (seven of which fell in one 24 hour period), and the area surrounding the canal at Fort Lauderdale was covered with two to three feet of water (*Miami Morning News-Record*, 6 and 8 October 1908, p.1). Stoneman could not hide his satisfaction in editorials after the disaster and beginning on 1 November 1908, he began a daily series of attacks on the Everglades drainage project. Governor Broward's term expired in early January 1909, and Stoneman apparently believed that constant agitation regarding the drainage project through the end of the year might persuade people and the incoming governor to abandon the effort until the Federal Government completed its investigations. Stoneman raised so many ques-

tions regarding Broward's Everglades drainage plan that it is a wonder Florida officials continued the project.

In a 1 November 1908 editorial, Stoneman suggested canals leading excess water from the Glades to the Atlantic Ocean would be subject to overflow during times of high tide. He added that "strong easterly winds have somewhat the same effect as the tides and frequently back the water up to the sources of those streams" (*Miami Morning News-Record*, p.2). As if this were not enough, Stoneman added (quite legitimately) that any drainage system should be able to quickly remove the 24-hour maximum rainfall for the region; original drainage plans had not taken this into account.

Two days later, Stoneman attacked the existing plan to drain the Everglades on economic grounds. In spite of the fact that work on the North New River Canal had begun in July 1906, Stoneman reported that not more than six miles had been dredged thus far (the canal would eventually span more than 70 miles) and that total costs of the project would far exceed projections (*Miami Morning News-Record*, 3 November 1908, p.2). Continuing with this line of thought the next day, Stoneman compared the amount of planning necessary for establishing a railroad and that which would be necessary to drain the Everglades. "What would be thought of a railroad corporation that would start the construction of a road without first making complete surveys of the entire route, fixing grades, locating bridges, computing costs, and the possible returns on the investment...And yet the state of Florida has been plunged into enormous expenditures in an attempt to drain the Everglades, without any previous investigation as to the character of the land to be drained, the ultimate cost of the operations, or any preliminary surveys preparatory to locating the canals" (*Miami Morning News-Record*, 4 November 1908, p.2). Maintaining the pressure along these lines, on 7 November 1908 Stoneman insisted that Governor Broward "open the books" and make public statements regarding expenses for the drainage project thus far (*Miami Morning News-Record*, p.2).

Within weeks Stoneman shifted tactics. Since Florida's drainage operations were funded with revenue from land sales in the Glades, and Everglades land sales (never substantial prior to 1909) had slowed to a trickle by late 1908, Governor Broward was under tremendous pressure to find buyers in order to provide revenue for continued drainage operations (Dovell 1947). In late 1908, Broward convinced a handful of speculators to purchase huge tracts of South Florida wetlands at low prices promising that the revenue would be

sufficient to drain the Glades and make them habitable. Frank Stoneman argued on 17 November 1908 (*Miami Morning News-Record*, p.2) that if such methods were necessary to sell and then drain the Glades, something must be wrong. "If those lands are so fabulously rich in fertility, why are they not being eagerly snapped up by growers?" Stoneman reasoned that throughout U.S. history people had always been interested in fertile agricultural land; but the relative lack of interest in the Everglades suggested that people had little faith in the existing drainage project. The next day, he observed that "men are not ordinarily so foolish as to invest their money in a scheme of which they know nothing and about which they can obtain no information." Stoneman correctly added that "the reason that there is no reliable information on the drainage scheme is that there has never been a scientific examination of the subject" (*Miami Morning News-Record*, 18 November 1908, p.2). Indeed, by New Year's Eve of 1908, Stoneman contended that "for the past two years [the] most strenuous endeavors have been made to dispose of the Everglade lands, and the result has been, as 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" (*Miami Morning News-Record*, 31 December 1908, p.2).

Stoneman must have breathed a sigh of relief when, in early January 1909, Albert W. Gilchrist took the oath of office as Florida's governor. He probably assumed—or at least hoped—that the new governor would not support Everglades drainage in light of the many unresolved economic and environmental issues. Such hopes were soon cruelly dispelled. The several land speculation companies that purchased large tracts of South Florida wetlands prepared tremendous volumes of literature which they distributed around the nation. This literature offered land for sale in the Everglades on the promise that the state's drainage operations would soon make such lands habitable. Furthermore, authors of this literature made many unsubstantiated and often inaccurate claims regarding the region's soil and climate (Meindl 1996). Being interested in South Florida's continued growth and development, Stoneman spoke out against Everglades realtors (*Miami Morning News-Record*, 9 February 1909, p.2). Yet Stoneman felt stung by those who suggested his criticism was unwarranted. In defense, he made clear that "the News-Record does not want to see a large number of dissatisfied people charging this community with being a set of swindlers, because the glittering promises on which they realized cannot be carried out" (*Miami Morning News-Record*, 11 February 1909, p.2).

Over the next few months, Stoneman probably felt overwhelmed by the "Everglades Fever" sweeping South Florida. When a dredge arrived in Miami during April 1909 to begin work on what later became known as the Miami Canal (Fig. 1), Stoneman huffed: "The hysterical enthusiasts should at least leave a few words to express their wonder, amazement, surprise, astonishment, admiration, gratification, pleasure, delight and thankfulness, when that same dredge finishes its work and proves its errand here is a practicable one" (*Miami Morning News-Record*, 8 April 1909, p.2). The next day, he used a similar tone in commenting on a story (regarding the arrival of the dredge) published in the *Miami Metropolis*, a competing newspaper: "The Metropolis says 'if in the whole United States there has ever been a celebration such as was held last night in the Fair building, by the citizens of Miami, history has failed to record it.' Probably in the whole United States it never before occurred to any set of people to celebrate the advent of any one of the thousands of dredges now at work in this country" (*Miami Morning News-Record*, 9 April 1909, p.2).

Remarkably, by 1911, Stoneman had apparently become a convert to the cause of Everglades drainage. In a New Year's Day 1911 editorial, he asserted that "this year will mark the beginning of the actual development of the Everglades, and every acre of land lying in Dade County that is brought into subjection to the plow will contribute directly to the growth and prosperity of Miami" (*Miami Herald*, p.2). Why the change of heart? In the same editorial he refers to the work of James Wright, and observed: "The tentative experiments that have been made seem to point to the eventual success of drainage." Even so, Stoneman remained cautious, arguing that "the development, to be of permanent value, must and will proceed slowly as men learn how to drain, to irrigate, to plant, to fertilize, and to market."

Six weeks later, the *Miami Herald* reprinted an editorial from a publication called *The Georgian*. It is significant because it provides a statement regarding a view of wetlands probably shared by Stoneman and many others during the early 20th century. The author of the reprinted editorial argues that wetlands are without value in their natural condition: "in fact, they are a menace to health, being breeding places for malaria-carrying mosquitoes; but when they are drained the tropics furnish no greater examples of fertility. They become immensely valuable" (*italics mine*). A year later, Stoneman reiterated his belief in wetland drainage under the proper circumstances: "It is well to state that the so-called opposition to drainage in this state, never has been directed against the development of the

Everglades, but was made against the methods by which they have been exploited " (*Miami Herald*, 15 February 1912, p.2).

Summary

How does one summarize Frank Stoneman and his views of the Everglades during the early 20th century? It is helpful to examine the man's views in terms of the relationship between facts, beliefs, and values. Stoneman appears to have shared with most people of this period a view of progress and land use that was heavily skewed toward agriculture. Converting wetlands into productive agricultural land was a cherished value of the times (Wright 1907). Yet unlike many people of this era, Stoneman tried not to allow this value to cloud his beliefs regarding the "facts" surrounding Everglades drainage and development. Indeed, Stoneman believed that the Glades might one day be drained and turned into farmland; but he was well aware that nobody understood the Everglades well enough to properly drain them. In other words, there were too few facts to develop appropriate beliefs regarding land use in the Glades. Stoneman raised several questions regarding the region's physical geography and the possible impacts of drainage—and he practically begged for thorough scientific investigations in order to develop a body of information (facts) which would help people develop reasonable beliefs on how to best use the land.

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