

Florida Agriculture and the Collapse of the State Farmers Alliance, 1880–1891

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In the last half of the 19th century, a new national economic system emerged from the factory expansions of the Civil War. Characterized by tight money supplies, expensive credit, and powerful bankers and railroad monopolies, the post-war economic regime established an industrialist class in Northeastern cities while leaving millions in poverty and farm tenancy in the countryside, particularly in the South and the Midwest. In the process, it set in motion a new populist consciousness among the poor. The Farmers Alliance was one of many organizational expressions of this emerging consciousness. Originally founded in Texas by a small coalition of politically astute hardscrabble farmers, the Alliance movement expanded quickly throughout the midwest and the former Confederacy, gaining members by the tens of thousands. The Alliance was short-lived, however. By the turn of the century, internal divisions had divided the movement's supporters, and mainstream political parties had adopted watered-down versions of its populist goals.

This paper is about the Farmers Alliance in late-19th-century Florida. When Alliance organizers from a dozen states met in Ocala, Florida, for their second annual national convention in 1890, the movement was reaching the height of its power nationally and had an estimated three million members (Woodward 1951). In Florida at the same time, ironically, the movement was flagging. Membership in the Florida Alliance, numbering 25,000 in 1889, fell to just a few thousand in 1891 and to nothing the following year (Knauss 1926). The geography of agriculture in Florida played an important role in this demise. The formation of a strong coalition movement was blocked in Florida by a combination of racism, black disenfranchisement and regional agricultural and commercial distinctions that pitted northern Floridians against their southern neighbors. This paper traces the history of this rift. In North Florida and the panhandle, the Alliance drew members from among tenant farmers, indebted farmers, cotton, rice and tobacco farmers, all of them with

an anger born in the hardships resulting from national and regional post-War money policies. In southern Florida, the peninsula, on the other hand, farmers from the emerging citrus belt had a different outlook. These were hopeful farmers, many of them romantic visionaries, some of them transplanted northerners with money to hold them through times of risk. Many had a conservative vision of individual entrepreneurial striving, of taming the Florida wilderness into a garden based on scientific crop management and good business sense. Like panhandle farmers, they were frustrated by high railroad freight rates and tight credit. But the federal government sent experts to help promote their new citrus science, and they knew they had a growing market for exported luxury foods in the expanding middle class up North. Citrus farmers, particularly owners of the larger farms, rejected the collectivism of the Farmers Alliance.

Tight Money: Conditions after the Civil War

Southern farmers had lost a third of their farm animals and half of all farm machinery to pillaging during the Civil War (Woodward 1951: 177-78). Republican tight-money policies imposed during and after the war cascaded into a series of personal and financial disasters. Money was unavailable; bank circulation, for example, amounted to \$77.16 per person in Massachusetts in 1869, compared with only \$0.13 per person in Arkansas that same year (Goodwyn 1976: 27). There were remarkably few banks in the South (Woodward 1951), which meant that farmers had few ways to seek credit. More importantly, interest rates skyrocketed, and thousands of farmers couldn't secure loans to pay wages or buy new seeds or equipment. Some sold out: Northern investors bought thousands of farms throughout the South in the decades following the War. Their purchases created a new kind of absentee-run plantation system (Woodward 1951). Other farmers turned to leasing or sharecropping.

Leasing and sharecropping spread the risk of crop loss. But they also led to the rise of an institution that sparked loathing in the hearts of the poorest farmers. This was the crop lien system, a system based on indebtedness to a new kind of Southern entrepreneur: the merchant banker (Ransom and Sutch 1969). The merchant banker, or "furnishing man," took loans from northern banks to supply his regional farm-goods store. He routinely paid 18 percent

or more as interest, passing along the cost to his farmer-clients, in some cases charging an effective rate of interest of 100 percent (Goodwyn 1976; Cory 1963). When farmers asked him for necessary supplies, he furnished them. But if they couldn't pay cash (most couldn't), they had to mortgage their crops as payment, and they subsequently faced even higher rates of interest. At the end of each harvest year, the farmers would turn over their crops to have the value of the loan—plus interest—deducted. Under Republican Reconstruction, all Southern states helped to aggravate the burden on poor farmers by passing laws making the crop mortgage system legally binding (Ransom and Sutch 1969).

Commodity prices were low and falling almost continuously after the Civil War, particularly on cotton and especially at harvest time, when the market was flooded. This contributed to a cost-price squeeze for farmers. In 1864, for example, cotton in Leon County, Florida, sold for more than \$1 per pound. By 1870 the per-pound price had dropped to 24 cents, and by 1890 it had plummeted to less than 12 cents (Hamburger 1987). The result was that thousands of farmers found themselves mired in debt, year after year. They couldn't diversify because they didn't have the capital; cotton cultivation expanded throughout the South as farmers struggled to compensate for staggering debts (Woodward 1951). Cash crops like cotton and corn were what the merchant bankers demanded, since they were less of a risk than untried produce. Unable to keep up with their mounting debts, however, thousands of Southerners lost their farms and joined the growing ranks of the hungry and homeless.

Rise of the Farmers Alliance

East Texas was a mecca for Southern farm refugees who perceived in the West the possibility of a promising new start. In 1878, a small group of these refugee farmers organized a secretive club—it held closed meetings—they called the Grand State Farmers Alliance. There were other grassroots agrarian groups in the South at the time, among them the national Grange movement and two more politically radical groups, the Agricultural Wheel and the Brothers of Freedom, both based in Arkansas. But the Texas group had a specific plan for itself: to break free from the prevailing credit system by finding some way to bypass the merchant banker. The Alliance strategy was to establish farmer-owned cooperative

“bulking warehouses” where members could merge their yields and attract competitive bids from large-scale regional buyers who would pay in cash instead of credit. After establishing these more favorable terms of sale, the Alliancemen would then pool their money to buy supplies and equipment directly from Northern manufacturers at cheaper bulk rates. All over Texas, Alliancemen found they could get cheaper rates on machinery, fertilizer, clothing and seed (Pavlovsky 1974; Goodwyn 1976; Woodward 1951). The idea caught on. By 1880, the Texas Alliance had its own newspaper—the *Southern Mercury*. By 1886, thousands of Texans had joined 2,700 Alliance branches in 84 counties (Mitchell 1987; McMath 1975; Barnes 1984).

Expansion, however, spurred internal division, and from the earliest years, the Farmers Alliance found itself plagued with contradictions. One early paradox of the Farmers Alliance was its racial segregation. The Farmers Alliance was open to women, but not to blacks. Many Alliancemen had fought in the Confederate Army. They’d shed blood to preserve racial oppression and now resisted some members’ calls for a racially united social movement. Black farmers organized a separate Colored Farmers Alliance in Texas in 1886. Though the two groups would work together closely over the next few years, the gulf between them offered a weak link that Democratic Party politicians—waving a banner of racist Confederate pride—could pry open later.

An equally important internal division centered on farmers’ visions of their goals and their status as poor property owners — capitalists, in a sense, with no capital. Buoyed by some early successes with cooperative marketing, many Alliance members began imagining new political avenues for their activism. In 1885, some Alliance members announced they would join with the Knights of Labor, the militant urban workers’ union that was organizing boycotts of railroads and steamship lines in Texas and the Midwest (Zinn 1980). When the Knights of Labor went on strike, many Alliance members offered food (Goodwyn 1976). Ironically, however, just as some Alliancemen were envisioning solidarity with urban industrial workers, others were seeing the opposite: coalitions of farmers and capitalists. In 1885, Texas Alliance leaders passed a resolution saying that “capital and labor should be allies and not enemies” (Goodwyn 1976:43).

In 1887, a new leader took over the Alliance and temporarily quieted the growing internal divisions. Under him, the Alliance embarked on several large-scale cooperative marketing projects and

sent “lecturer-educators” throughout the South. By 1887, the Alliance had branches in 10 states. It merged with the Farmers’ Union of Louisiana, another populist group, in 1887, and with the Agricultural Wheel of Arkansas in 1888. Estimates of its membership ranged from 1.3 million to 3 million nationwide (Woodward 1951). Members protested railroad freight rates and the monopolistic practices of grain elevator companies; they found ways of bypassing regional middlemen and extricating themselves, at least partly, from debt; they were becoming a potential threat to two-party politics, and both Democrats and Republicans started noticing them (Clark 1927).

Although there are few records giving detailed accounts of Alliance membership, it appears that Alliance members came from a broad cross-section of poverty-level conditions in the South. In South Carolina, for example, the only state where records are available, about half of the Alliance members owned their own land, and another third were tenants or sharecroppers. Membership also included preachers, teachers, mechanics and country doctors. Lawyers, real estate dealers, store owners, bankers, warehouse owners and railroad employees were banned from membership (Woodward 1951: 193).

Alliancemen faced strong opposition. In Dothan, Alabama, for example, after the local Alliance pooled money from 150 farmers and bought fertilizer at highly reduced bulk rates, bypassing local dealers, a group of local merchants, bankers and warehouse owners convinced the city government to pass a special tax on Alliance storage warehouses. When the Alliance moved its warehouse to the outskirts of town, a gunfight ensued, and two Alliancemen died (Clark 1927; Goodwyn 1976; Woodward 1951). Alliance newspapers were being founded in many states. In Mississippi, the building housing one of them was burned to the ground (Woodward 1951).

Florida After the War: Racism and Regional Disparities

Post-Civil-War Florida was a land of powerful contrasts. There were growing regional disparities in wealth and agricultural development, enormous investment opportunities, strong fear of black empowerment among both rich whites and poor ones. The Democratic Party served as a strong voice for conservative political thinking. The situation simultaneously encouraged and thwarted agrarian discontent and collective consciousness.

Like other former Confederate States, Florida had lost tens of millions of dollars to property damage during the war (Hanna 1948). With the goal of luring much needed capital to the state, carpetbaggers and scalawags sold land cheaply to railroad and land development companies run by Northern investors. Between 1865 and 1870, millions of acres of timber and farmland were bought by investment firms incorporated in states like New York, Pennsylvania, Connecticut, Illinois and Maine (Hanna 1948: 322-4).

Republican Reconstruction had ended in statewide elections in 1876; Conditions of gross inequality prevailed under the new Democratic regime. The post-Reconstruction Democrats called themselves "Redeemers," but their policies didn't redeem the poorest from the new internal colonialism. On the contrary, the Democrats' main strategy was to disenfranchise blacks, keep taxes low, spend little on infrastructure improvement or social services, and grant additional large landholdings to railroad and investment firms. Railroads had been exempted from state taxes by an 1855 law; neither Republicans nor Democrats overturned this law for several decades (Abbey 1938; Hanna 1948).

In 1884, a coalition of black Republicans and sympathetic white Democrats founded the Florida Independent Party, which held a rally in Gainesville that year to demand equal access to education, transportation and public office. Similar small independent parties were emerging in Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi and Texas, all posing small but distinct threats to white leadership. The following year, Florida Democrats took action to obliterate the new organization. In 1885, when legislators rewrote the state constitution, they established a poll tax and several other measures, including a literacy test, effectively banning blacks from voting. In 1887, Florida legislators became the first in the nation to pass a Jim-Crow law requiring railroads to segregate passengers by race. On top of this, in 1889, Floridians passed a "multiple ballot" law requiring that voters fill out separate forms for separate ballot boxes for each elected office. By 1889, Florida was a nearly single-party state; it belonged almost exclusively to Democrats (Pavlovsky 1974). Measures were also passed encouraging the expansion of the convict lease system.

By 1890, conditions for many Floridians were grim, particularly in northern and panhandle Florida and particularly for black farmers. There had been more than 60,000 slaves in Florida at the outset of the Civil War (Williams 1950), and blacks now outnumber

bered whites in the panhandle (Hanna 1948), where prices for traditional cash crops had plummeted to one-tenth their 1864 values (Hamburger 1987). About 35 percent of Florida farmers, most of them in the north and panhandle, were tenants or sharecroppers (Cory 1963:91). They were paying roughly two-thirds of their crop as rent (Hanna 1948: 299).

Yet just as one form of agriculture stagnated, the citrus industry was expanding. Spaniards had brought oranges to Florida in the 16th century, but commercial expansion didn't start until 1821, when Florida became U.S. property. Slave traders were among Florida's early grove planters. One well-known slave trader used profits from his business to plant large groves along the St. Johns River, which would soon become a regional center of citrus cultivation (Clark 1947).

Nearly every state sent new residents to Florida in the decades after the Civil War. Fueling the migration were dozens of promotional brochures and newspaper articles extolling Florida's virtues. There were books and tourism pamphlets; editors in Massachusetts and Iowa published glowing letters from native sons gone South. Orange groves, the promoters promised, bore golden fruits and required little help from farmers ("A Florida Settler of 1877"). Immigrants came by the thousands as transportation infrastructure—coastal steamer routes, train routes, riverboat routes—multiplied (Hanna 1948; Clark 1947).

A few of the nation's wealthiest industrialists came to Florida to get involved in real estate and in the expanding citrus industry or businesses that served it. For example, Henry Sanford, an industrialist whose family owned brass factories in Connecticut and who had served as President Lincoln's ambassador to Belgium, bought 12,500 acres for an orange grove, establishing the town of Sanford in 1871 (Nolan 1984; Hanna 1948); Philadelphia tool manufacturer Hamilton Disston bought 14 million acres in the Kissimmee Valley in 1883; Henry Plant, another Connecticut millionaire, began buying and consolidating railroad lines in the emerging citrus belt in 1879. By 1899, he had amassed and built a huge railroad empire stretching from Charleston to Tampa (Hanna 1948). Henry Flagler, former president of Standard Oil of New Jersey (Nolan 1984) came to Florida in 1883 to buy and build resort hotels and railroads, a few of them in the citrus belt (Hanna 1948; Woodward 1951).

New towns were opening up rapidly as northern-financed railroad construction linked the peninsula to regional markets in

Jacksonville. Most citrus growers in 1875 worked along the Atlantic coast of north Florida (Lewis 1979). But between 1880 and 1885, 1,100 miles of new railroad track were added, and considerable mileage—450 miles, built mostly by Connecticut industrialist Henry Plant—now made up a network of shipping lines crisscrossing the peninsula from Jacksonville south to St. Petersburg. By 1880, the state had 269,493 residents, a third of them born elsewhere (Lewis 1979; Weeks 1977). Orange County even had a polo club for British-born orange growers (Weeks 1977). The state orange crop amounted to 25 million oranges in 1875. Six years later, it had more than doubled (Lewis 1979; Clark 1947). By 1885, 25,000 acres of orange groves were adding \$2 million each year to the Florida economy (Weeks 1977: 12).

Citrus farmers experienced considerable hardships and challenges on the tropical frontier. Their crop, after all, had not yet become the focus of much research, and citrus farming consequently was considered somewhat risky and experimental. Still, their experiences were far from those of the embattled farmers of the cotton belt. For one thing, it took some capital to build an orange grove, especially since speculation was driving up land prices throughout the citrus belt. A grove that sold for \$12,000 in 1874, for example, sold again for \$15,000 in 1878 and again for \$42,000 in 1881 (Clark 1947: 43). As early as 1868, plots along the St. John's River were selling for \$100 per acre. And near Orange Lake, a 500-acre tract sold for \$4 an acre in 1869, \$10 an acre in 1871, and \$30 an acre in 1873 (Weeks 1977: 43). A U.S. Department of Agriculture study estimated in 1882 that it cost at least \$850 just for maintenance of five acres of orange grove for five years (Clark 1947: 42).

Expansion brought its own internal pressures for change. As prices fell because of increased production, competition grew more fierce, and soon larger, wealthier growers went looking for ways to segment the citrus market—to differentiate themselves, their processes and their products. They experimented with new ways of distributing their crop; they also established criteria for grading and rating each crop so that each grade could command its own price. New marketing and growing technology, new construction and new scientific research—mostly sponsored by larger growers in conjunction with the federal government—made possible improved-quality foods; they also reinforced social rifts separating larger growers from smaller ones, wealthy growers from poorer ones, folk farming from the emerging science of citrus-crop management.

A grove plow, for example, was developed and marketed in 1873. The following year, several growers established the Florida Fruit Growers Association. The president's brother-in-law, a New York fruit buyer, built Florida's first commercial citrus-packing house that year. A few larger growers soon started building their own packing houses, and in 1875 the year-old Fruit Growers Association adopted a standardized box size. These changes made for better grades of produce and more efficient marketing; they opened up new opportunities to increase prices, but they benefitted larger growers more than smaller ones. This is because commercial fruit packers wanted good, unbruised fruit that had been carefully picked. Larger growers could afford to hire workers to pick and sort fruit slowly and carefully. Smaller growers, on the other hand, lacked the capital to refine their operations, and many continued the old system of picking fruit in large quantities and loading it, unsorted, onto wagons where it got bruised in route to sale. The low relative quality was soon bringing lower prices to the smaller growers, further reinforcing emerging social divisions (Weeks 1977). A few packing houses, moreover, soon established more elaborate production lines—increasingly mechanized as years went by—aimed at sorting, grading, packing and wrapping fruits separated by size and appearances. By 1889, there were mechanical sorters and wrappers to speed up the process and even print designer-label brand names on fruit-wrapping paper (Weeks 1977).

New fertilizers were being invented and were selling for up to \$60 a ton as early as the 1870s. A few larger growers (Henry Sanford among them), furthermore, purchased swamp lands and built small railroads to carry rich swamp muck—for fertilizer—to their groves. By 1886, one large grower built a \$50,000 irrigation plant that served 250 acres of grove. Smaller growers were relying on barrels of water carried from nearby lakes (Weeks 1977).

Throughout the 1870s, nurseries sprang up in the citrus belt; they offered growers who could afford them new experimental varieties, many of them imports from citrus-growing British colonies in the Middle East. The United States Department of Agriculture joined in citrus experiments in 1871, building a fruit-tree greenhouse in 1878 and sending Florida an entomologist specializing in citrus infestations in 1879. By 1885, there were more than 40 commercial citrus nurseries, and managers at Henry Sanford's groves reported experimenting with 180 citrus varieties (Weeks 1977). The federal government sponsored reports and publications

in citrus science throughout this decade, and in 1889 came up with an experimental insecticide which it distributed to several growers participating in government-run research projects.

Florida citrus growers competed among themselves; but they also competed in an international market that brought to U.S. consumers, particularly in the northeast, citrus products from Mexico, the Caribbean and the Mediterranean. At times, consequently, fruit markets were flooded, and prices fluctuated wildly. In response, growers early on went looking for ways to rationalize and coordinate the marketing and pricing of their crop. In 1885, several of the largest growers organized the Florida Fruit Exchange (FFE). The FFE chose several men to be its exclusive agents in several major market cities; these special agents would be in charge of accepting shipments and selling fruit at regional auctions. Hoping to use the system to secure prices and gain access to large urban markets, many small growers participated in the Exchange. But the very first year was a failure. Small growers, it turned out, wound up flooding the market with poor quality fruit, including oranges frozen in a cold wave in the winter of 1886. The larger growers, on the other hand, had hedged their bets—staying away from the smaller growers and for the most part bypassing the FFE, instead shipping fruit through the old and familiar system of independent brokers working on consignment and commission. The result: prices fell; everyone, but particularly the smaller growers, lost money. The following year, growers from seven counties organized the Florida Fruit and Vegetable Growers Protective Organization, another attempt at uniting farmers for mutual benefit. Once again, however, membership was minimal.

This lack of coordination and trust among citrus growers would plague the peninsula and thwart industry-wide cooperation for decades to come (Cory 1963; LaGodna 1962; Clark 1947; Pavlovsky 1974; Weeks 1977). But it had larger ramifications. The same lack of trust and coordination—dividing blacks from whites, rich from poor, cotton farmers from citrus farmers, and citrus farmers from one another—thwarted the Farmers Alliance as well.

The Farmers Alliance in Florida

Two organizers from the Texas Farmers' Alliance came to Florida in 1887, where they encountered the prevailing conditions of regional unevenness in agricultural development (Proctor 1950;

Knauss 1926; Cory 1963; Abbey 1938; Hanna 1948). In the peninsula, where farmers' major concerns were marketing citrus fruits, securing prices and scientific support and attracting new residents and investors, Alliance organizers rallied little initial support. In northern Florida and the panhandle, by contrast, among the tenants and indebted men clinging to ailing cotton, rice and tobacco farms, they rallied supporters remarkably quickly. By October of 1887, after just a few months of Alliance organizing, there were 2,000 Florida Alliance members divided into 65 local clubs. A month later, there were 120 local clubs. The first annual Florida Alliance convention, held in the panhandle town of Marianna in 1887, drew representatives from 12 counties, 10 of them in the cotton-growing region of the northern part of the state, including Bradford, Calhoun, Gadsden, Jackson, Liberty, Madison, Walton, Washington, Holmes and Duval counties (Knauss 1926; Cory 1963). The Alliance bought Marianna's local newspaper, the *West Florida Inquirer*, renaming it *The Farmers Alliance of Florida and Georgia* (Knauss 1926).

The Florida Alliance's first annual convention built upon and restructured a pre-existing but loosely knit north-Florida farmers' movement. The year Alliance organizers arrived, the Florida Farmers' Union had listed at least 1,700 members in 12 cotton-raising northern counties. Unlike the Alliance, however, the Farmers' Union forbade racial discrimination at the state level, and all members were welcome at state meetings (Cory 1963). In 1888, when Alliance organizers got the Union to agree to a merger, the rules were changed, and blacks were put out of the new organization.

The Florida Republican Party—what little remained of it—recognized the new Alliance almost immediately, including in its 1888 party platform a resolution of "sympathy and support" (Cory 1963:28) for Alliancemen and their goals. But Alliance leaders and strategists were careful not to alienate or to woo either party—Democrat or Republican—and that year the Alliance leadership passed a resolution forbidding members, under penalty of expulsion, to run for office as third-party candidates (Cory 1963:31). This was soon to become a central tension in the Florida movement.

By July of 1889, the Alliance had 372 local branches in 24 counties, and by December of that year it boasted 25,000 members. Remarkably, this was nearly half the voting population of Florida that year (Knauss 1926:304). The numbers served as powerful evidence of the Alliance's success in tapping into regional discon-

tent. Most members came from the north and the panhandle, but there were small local branches by this time in ten citrus-belt counties as well (Cory 1963; Knauss 1926).

Despite its expanding membership, the Florida Alliance ran into trouble right from the start. Just as Alliancemen stepped up efforts to lure new members, especially in the north, interest was growing in the peninsula for a new citrus-marketing program to serve the exclusive interests of south-Florida orange growers. From the beginning, then, the Alliance faced competition for farmer allegiance, and orange growers stayed away. This, combined with growing regional and ideological tensions in the populist movement as a whole, put the Florida Alliance in a difficult situation.

In 1888, Alliance leaders organized the cooperative Florida Alliance Exchange in Jacksonville. Modeled after the Texas Farmers Alliance's experiment in agrarian cooperation, the Exchange's goal was to free Florida farmers from oppressive prevailing terms of credit. In its very first year, the Alliance Exchange handled thousands of boxes of farm products, particularly cotton, with nearly \$40,000 in orders for bulk-rate supplies. It was able to secure loans to farmers at a rate of 12 percent interest instead of the more common 100 percent (Cory 1963), and its warehouse managers negotiated directly with regional cotton mills to bypass local merchants (Pavlovsky 1974:160). An estimated 20,000 farmers, almost exclusively from northern Florida and the panhandle, conducted business dealings through the Alliance Exchange in the first year (Pavlovsky 1974:159).

As citrus farmers saw it, however, a central problem with the Alliance Exchange was that it didn't meet their needs. The Exchange warehouse building, for example, didn't have refrigeration facilities—something citrus growers required if they were to participate in the auction system. Consequently, in 1889, a few citrus growers organized their own separate Orange Auction and Vegetable Company in Jacksonville, and arranged, at least in principle, to cooperate with the Alliance Exchange. Few growers joined, however. The Alliance Exchange that year wound up handling only poorer-grade oranges—and only in relatively small quantities (Weeks 1977; Pavlovsky 1974). Some growers tried again, organizing the Florida Orange Growers Union in 1889. Once again, few growers joined it. The old, non-cooperative marketing system—by which independent brokers contracted to work on consignment

with growers —still accounted for nearly 90 percent of dealings in oranges (Weeks 1977: 199).

On top of its problems uniting citrus farmers with other growers, the Florida Alliance started experiencing internal dissent. The battle lines were drawn starkly as early as 1889, when the Alliance held state-wide elections for officers. The new state Alliance vice-president was a political radical who hoped to use Alliance machinery and personnel to launch a new independent political party which he hoped would challenge Democrats and Republicans on issues of national banking and monetary policies. The newly elected state president, on the other hand, was a staunch Democrat. He pledged unity and cooperation among Alliance members and cautioned against a new “class” politics emerging from some sectors of the Alliance movement. (Knauss 1926; Proctor 1950; LaGodna 1962; Pavlovsky 1974). Florida Alliancemen were not alone in facing internal political strife. Throughout the former Confederacy —in Tennessee, Texas, Arkansas, Georgia, North and South Carolina, Alabama and Mississippi —Alliance leaders and rank-and-file members split along similar lines (Pavlovsky 1974). While midwestern Alliancemen tended to support the formation of independent new political parties, Southerners balked. Their main fear was of dividing the white vote and consequently jeopardizing white rule in the South. For this reason they tended to want to reform the Democratic Party from within rather than from without (Abbey 1938; LaGodna 1962; Pavlovsky 1974; Woodward 1951). When Alliancemen met for their first annual national convention in St. Louis in 1889, the regional rifts were palpable.

State legislative elections around the nation in 1890 brought dozens of Alliancemen and Alliance sympathizers into formal politics. After Florida state elections that year, three-fifths of the legislators were Alliance members. What’s more, there were seven state newspapers owned by the Alliance. Similar patterns marked other southern states. But throughout the South, while the newly elected Alliance Democrats introduced limited measures to regulate certain banking practices and control working hours, they ignored many of the crucial and more intractable sources of agrarian poverty —the crop lien system, the national finance and credit crisis, the railroads and the land barons (Proctor 1950).

By 1890, the Florida Alliance Exchange in Jacksonville was deeply in debt. Supply orders weren’t being filled because money

was not available to pay for them. A number of farmers complained that products were disappearing from the warehouse (Weeks 1977). Unable to return farmers' money and crops, Alliance leaders admitted that the Exchange had been grossly undercapitalized, operating with far fewer funds than had originally been planned. The response from farmers was mixed. Some abandoned the Alliance in disappointment over financial mismanagement at the Exchange. Others blamed the Exchange's failures on broader conditions related to the national credit supply. A general feeling of malaise was taking hold, and the ideological gulf was deepening between branches of the movement in Florida and elsewhere.

The National Convention at Ocala

Events in Florida reflected and precipitated a nationwide reorganizing of populist sympathies. In December 1890, the national Farmers Alliance movement held its second annual week-long convention in the city of Ocala, Florida. Delegates came from throughout the South as well as from such places as Colorado, Illinois, Indiana, Kansas, Maryland, Missouri, North and South Dakota, Pennsylvania, Oklahoma, California, Michigan, and New Mexico. Florida Alliancemen hoped the convention would advertise Florida, luring investment from outside and new membership from the recalcitrant citrus belt. As convention hosts, Florida Alliancemen set up impressive displays of the Sunshine State's bounty, organizing field trips for fishing and swimming and awarding convention attendees large gift boxes of oranges and lemons. But infighting was rampant among delegates from opposing Alliance factions.

Almost all the Alliance delegates at Ocala hoped to develop a platform, some statement of specific policy goals related to the plight of the indebted farmer. What subsequently emerged from the Ocala convention —amid bitter factionalism —was a controversial platform, the "Ocala Demands," that became the founding platform of the national Populist Party, organized formally several months later. Some of the demands on the platform were considered quite radical in their day in the sense of calling for unprecedented levels of government intervention in the economy. Conventioneers demanded, for example, that the federal government intervene to stop currency contractions and expand the national money supply by at least \$50 per capita. They demanded that the government ban futures trading and speculation on farm supplies and equipment —

a big demand, considering that Chicago and other emerging Midwestern power centers had been built explicitly by capital derived from such speculation. They demanded that the government abandon the gold standard and begin an unlimited coinage of silver (then considered plentiful). They also demanded that the federal government take back and distribute to settlers all land owned by railroads but not being used for rails. The Alliance platform called for strong federal regulation of railroads and a restructuring of the federal tax system that would shift major burdens from individuals to corporations (Knauss 1926; Proctor 1950; La Godna 1962; Pavlovsky 1974). The central and most controversial plank was a plan by which the federal government would abolish the national banks, replacing them with a system of county-level "sub-treasuries" that would essentially serve as government-run crop storehouses and low-interest loan centers. Draped in dramatic rhetoric, the sub-treasury plan was touted by its supporters as a "system [to] emancipate productive labor from the power of money to oppress" (quoted in LaGodna 1962: 59). The *New York Times*, by contrast, which had sent a reporter to cover the Ocala convention, called the plan "one of the wildest and most fantastic projects ever seriously proposed by sober man" (quoted in Proctor 1950: 174). There was opposition from within the Alliance as well. One South Carolina Alliance member called the plan "so palpably wrong on its face as to make it absurd to all who have the prosperity and welfare of the country at heart" (quoted in Proctor 1950: 174). In essence, the Farmers Alliance was coming under intensive fire both from within and from the outside.

Radicals in the Alliance, for their part, hoped to use the Ocala Demands as a platform from which to move the organization toward becoming a third political party. Midwesterners —particularly from Kansas and Nebraska —worked especially hard to lobby the conventioners for this goal, as did black members of the National Colored Alliance, which, banned from the whites-only formal Alliance meeting, was holding its own convention simultaneously in another part of town. Southern convention delegates, however, many of them Democrats, refused to join in this effort. The leaders among them lectured on the need for party unity to stem a tide of third-partyism (LaGodna 1962; Proctor 1950). Adding to the strife was debate over a bill, then pending in Congress, to bring state elections under federal supervision. Westerners and Midwesterners supported the bill, as did the Colored Alliance. Southern

Democrats, fearing a federally guided re-enfranchisement of blacks, strongly condemned it (Pavlovsky 1974; La Godna 1962).

The Ocala convention ended with a majority voting in favor of the controversial "Demands." But too many ideological rifts had emerged, and when the convention ended, Florida Alliancemen found themselves unable to sustain a coalition either in spirit or in practice. By the summer of 1891, seven of Florida's 676 local and county Alliance branches surrendered their charters. Dozens more, still formally in existence, had lost all their members. Democrats — playing on racial fears by calling for unity — had split from radicals. The Alliance Exchange, after less than two years, was on its last legs. By November 1891, one state newspaper reported that membership in the Florida Alliance had dropped to 6,500 (Abbey 1938).

By 1892, new institutions had emerged to channel populist energies. That year, the state Alliance's radical former vice-president ran for governor as a third-party candidate, carrying five North Florida counties with 8,309 votes but losing miserably to the Democratic Party candidate's 32,064 votes (Abbey 1938: 463; Knauss 1926: 314). Elsewhere in the nation, Farmers Alliance branches were organizing the emerging Populist Party. What remained of the Florida Alliance was subsumed into this official Populism. Florida farmers would never again try uniting under an organization catering specifically to agrarian interests.

Conclusion

The Farmers Alliance emerged from agrarian poverty brought on by post-Civil-War changes in national politics and the economy. It gave voice to farmers' discontent with federal credit and money policies, and it enabled thousands to free themselves for a short time from overwhelming debt. But the movement was rife with contradictions. In Florida, Alliance promoters encountered racial fears that kept many members loyal to a repressive Democratic Party. They also encountered gross geographical disparities in agricultural wealth and vision, a situation that divided farmers and kept them from uniting around a common goal or perceiving a common enemy to fight. These served to make the state particularly unstable as a base for Alliance organizing. The movement itself was undercapitalized, and its Florida produce warehouse consequently went into bankruptcy, further diminishing the Alliance's credibility and effectiveness. The story of the Florida Farmers Alliance reveals

the obstacles organizers face wherever they try shaping generalized agrarian discontent into a cohesive movement for social change. These are the obstacles posed by geographically divided interests and divergent social visions.

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