One of the hallmarks of Florida's long history of commercial sugarcane production is spatial instability. Unlike Louisiana, where the cane growing area has remained essentially the same for almost two hundred years, sugar production in Florida has concentrated in diverse regions at different times. This article traces Florida's sugarcane industry from its beginnings in the eighteenth century to the present day. Emphasis is placed on the changes in location of the industry, and the environmental, economic, and political forces instrumental in effecting these changes. Four periods of development of the industry can be identified: (1) ca. 1767 to 1836; (2) ca. 1850 to 1864; (3) 1880 to 1896, and (4) ca. 1920 to the present (Fig. 1, Cover).

The Northeast, ca. 1767 - 1836

Sugarcane was introduced to Florida by the Spanish shortly after the founding of St. Augustine in 1565. However, the limited records available for the first Spanish occupation (1565 - 1763) provide no indication that the sucrose yielding grass was cultivated on a commercial basis. Experiments were doubtless conducted with cane, as they were with other crops, but no marketable commodities were developed. Indeed, mercantile activity in Spanish Florida was so inconsequential that the territorial governor referred to his domain as a "land of no commerce" in a letter written to the King in 1675. The absence of commerce was particularly notable in agriculture. Spanish land policy discouraged widespread settlement, and religious, political, and military motives took precedence over agrarian concerns.

The first record of commercial sugarcane production in Florida is associated with the brief era of British control that lasted from 1763 to 1783. Unlike the Spanish, who emphasized missions and forts, the British settled primarily as large planters from South Carolina and Georgia, or associations of capitalists who established colonies of indentured white servants. Florida was perceived by Great Britain as a source of tropical agricultural commodities, and the plantation system was deemed the most effective means to maximize production. Accordingly, large holdings were dispensed to planters, and bounties were provided to stimulate farm production.

The plantation system that evolved between 1763 and 1783 focused on the province of "East Florida." St. Augustine was the locus of activity for this region, and the new agrarian enterprises were close to the city. Since land transportation was almost non-existent, estates were situated on the Halifax, Tomoka, Matanzas, and St. John's Rivers.

The planters who migrated to Florida initially devoted their efforts to rice and indigo. The latter emerged as the leading agricultural commodity of the province, but other crops were tried and successfully produced on a limited scale. Exports from East Florida between 1776 and 1778 included small quantities of rice, coffee, Indian corn, oranges, vinegar, tobacco, cotton, ginger, pimento, pinkroot, sarsaparilla and sugar.

Plantation owners expected sugarcane to evolve into one of East Florida's most successful crops, and cane was cultivated as early as 1767 on some estates (including Dr. Andrew Turnbull's utopian colony at New Smyrna). Lieutenant Governor John Moultrie, an ardent proponent of cane cultivation, harvested a crop on his plantation south of St. Augustine in 1770. Yields were excellent and during the following year all the farmers in the southern part of the province planted small fields of cane.
But despite promising experiments and sporadic commercial productivity, the crop failed to achieve notable success. Occasional frosts injured the cane and impeded large-scale production. With the retrocession of the territory to Spain (1783), the plantations in East Florida were abandoned. Most of the British inhabitants departed and the province temporarily regressed into the economic stagnation that had prevailed prior to English occupation.

The foundation for Florida's first sugar "empire" was laid during the early years of the nineteenth century. Threatened by United States territorial expansion, Spain adopted a policy that encouraged settlement of its Florida domain. The Crown offered land grants to Spanish subjects and foreigners in the hope that widespread occupation of Florida would counter the anticipated incursions of the increasingly powerful neighbor to the north. A number of British planters residing in the Bahamas availed themselves of the Spanish offer and settled along the Matanzas, Tomoka, and Halifax Rivers.

During the first two decades of the nineteenth century lands along all three rivers were rapidly brought under cultivation. The change in political control from Spain to the United States in 1819 did little to stem the flow of migrants or alter the general prosperity of the area, a prosperity increasingly based on sugarcane. From the early 1820s until 1836 lands along the Matanzas, Tomoka, and Halifax Rivers emerged as the first large-scale commercial cane producing district in Florida.

By 1825 sixteen estates were producing sugar along Florida's east coast between St. Augustine and New Smyrna. Land had been cleared and drained, diversion ditches were constructed, and thousands of acres were planted to cane. Hundreds of slaves harvested the crop, and at least ten steam-driven sugar mills were in operation. Production continued to increase during the 1830s. The September 29, 1832 edition of the Niles Register reported that ten plantations were each producing 80 to 100 hogsheads of sugar annually.

Florida's Atlantic Coast "Sugar Empire" was abruptly terminated during the Second Seminole War, which commenced in December 1835. Within weeks after the conflict started, the Seminoles embarked on a burning and pillaging spree that laid waste to the sugar plantations. By February 10, 1836 the estates were in ruins, and shortly thereafter, an unknown correspondent wrote from St. Augustine:

The whole of the country south from St. Augustine has been laid waste during the past week, and not a building of any value left standing. There is not a single house now remaining between the city and Cape Florida, a distance of 250 miles. All, all have been burnt to the ground.

With destruction of the cane plantations and the departure of planters from the area, large-scale sugarcane production in East Florida ended. All that remains of this once thriving enterprise are the remnants of sugar mills at New Smyrna, Port Orange, Ormond Beach, and "Bulowville."

Manatee and Citrus Counties, ca. 1860-1864

The demise of Florida's first sugar "empire" did not halt cane production in the territory. Successful experiments in sugar cultivation were reported by numerous cotton planters in northwestern and central Florida during the 1830s and 1840s, but the cost and time required to initiate and sustain large-scale production negated any attempts to do so. The combination of time, money, and effort requisite for a profitable sugar industry did occur along Florida's Gulf Coast during the 1840s and 1850s. In an effort to attract settlers to the sparsely populated region around Tampa Bay the U.S. government enacted the "Armed Occupation Act" in 1842. Under its provisions 160 acres were allotted to
any "head of family or single man over 18 who was able to bear arms and was willing to live on the land for five years and cultivate at least five acres." The act coincided with the end of the Second Seminole War, and the prospect of obtaining fertile land at little or no cost in an area where the Indian menace was diminished spurred a rush of new settlers into the area. Most of the pioneers were small subsistence farmers, but large sugar planters hoping to exploit virgin lands were also attracted to the region. Many of the latter came from Leon County in northcentral Florida, where they had suffered severe financial losses when the Union Bank of Tallahassee collapsed in 1837. Hoping to recoup lost fortunes, they commenced growing cane on the fertile bottomlands adjacent to the Manatee River south of Tampa Bay.

The number of sugar plantations established in the Manatee area during the 1840s was small, but in terms of acreage and production they surpassed their predecessors on the east coast. The largest and most successful enterprise was the estate of Robert Gamble. A complex drainage system was installed on Gamble's plantation, and by 1849 he had 1,400 acres in cane. Over 150 slaves worked the fields, and the cane they harvested was processed in an enormous mill located on the plantation. Gamble's estate was the largest and most thoroughly equipped in the nation. The refinery contained the most expensive and modern machinery of the day, and produced an average of 220,000 pounds of sugar and 10,000 gallons of molasses between 1849 and 1855.

The efforts of men like Gamble transformed a raw wilderness into the largest sugar producing region in Florida in less than a decade. But the success of this second sugar empire was short-lived. A nation-wide depression during the late 1850s reduced sugar prices drastically. Planters located along the Manatee accumulated large debts and were forced to dispose of their holdings. Gamble's estate, slaves, and mill were sold to the Louisiana firm of Cofield and Davis in 1858 for $190,000.

The sale of the sugar estates marked the end of commercial cane production in the Manatee area. The census of 1860 enumerates only 18 slave owners and 253 slaves for the county. Cofield, the sole slave-owner to list his occupation as "planter," had under his control 190 slaves, 75% of the county total. No other slave-holder had over eleven chattels, and fourteen of the eighteen owned one to five slaves. These figures suggest that by 1860 only Cofield possessed the work force necessary to operate the labor-intensive undertaking that is a sugar plantation. However, shortly before hostilities between the states commenced Cofield's slaves were transferred to Louisiana, and work on Manatee's largest sugar plantation ceased.

Sugar continued to be produced in Manatee County during and after the war, but on a greatly reduced basis. In 1870, less then 15 years after the Gamble estate alone had produced 300,000 pounds of sugar, the combined output from Manatee County was only 41,000 pounds. Currently, the most visible legacy of Manatee's nineteenth century flirtation with large-scale commercial sugarcane production is the Gamble Plantation Mansion, a state historic site located in Ellenton.

Antebellum sugar production along Florida's Gulf Coast was not totally confined to the Manatee River area. At least one other large plantation was operating ninety miles north of the Manatee in present-day Citrus County. David Levy Yulee, a personage of some import in Florida history, owned a 5,100 acre estate on the Homosassa River that started producing sugar around 1851. Yulee's steam-powered mill supplied sugar products to the Confederacy during the war, but both the mill and the plantation were abandoned during 1864 when Federal troops destroyed the Yulee home. After the war Yulee's agricultural interests waned, and commercial sugar production along the Homosassa ended.
Cane continued to be cultivated on hundreds of small farms throughout Florida after the Civil War, but for domestic consumption only. However, as the state's southern peninsular area became settled, increasing attention was devoted to developing Florida's Everglades. In 1880 Hamilton Disston and his associates purchased four million acres of state land with the goal of converting much of it to sugarcane. Disston's company directed its efforts at reclaiming lands around the headwaters of the Kissimmee River near the Tohopekaliga Lakes, some seventy miles north of Okeechobee. The soil in the area was a rich black loam considered by experienced cane growers to be unsurpassed for sugar production.

Drainage operations commenced in the vicinity of the lakes during 1881, and by 1885 several canals had been completed, the level of the lakes had been lowered, and prairie land between the lakes reclaimed for cultivation. In conjunction with the reclamation project Disston acquired interest in the St. Cloud plantation, Osceola County, in 1887. A factory was erected, almost 1,000 acres of drained land were planted to cane, and 600 to 700 laborers were contracted to work the fields. Cane produced so well on Osceola's muck soils that sugar yields were adjudged to be "superior to any American record up to that time." By 1892, St. Cloud accounted for 80 percent of Florida's total sugar output, and at the peak of its productivity in 1895 the plantation mill produced more than 1.5 million pounds of sugar.

Despite its record output the St. Cloud operation failed to make a profit. Excessive drainage costs, the financial panic of 1893, Congressional repeal of an 1890 sugar bounty, winter freezes, and Disston's untimely death combined to end the venture. The estate was sold in 1896-97, and the mill was dismantled and shipped to Mexico. Dissolution of the St. Cloud plantation once again signaled a reversion to small-scale subsistence sugar cultivation in Florida, and by 1908 state-wide production had plummeted to a mere 7,000 pounds.

Lake Okeechobee, ca. 1920 - 1980

Although Disston's attempt to produce sugar commercially at St. Cloud failed, many individuals continued to believe the plant could be successfully produced on the reclaimed lands of southern Florida. The marshlands adjacent to Lake Okeechobee were considered particularly suitable for cane cultivation because their rich organic soils required no fertilization, and frosts were rare. Furthermore, the flat, treeless Everglades made large-scale mechanization feasible. Rising sugar prices in 1918 and 1919 impelled a number of entrepreneurs to take advantage of these fortuitous environmental circumstances, and the cane industry was revived along Okeechobee's shores. Thousands of acres of sugarcane were planted on the southern and eastern margins of the lake during the 1920s, and the harvested product was processed in newly erected mills at Canal Point, Moore Haven, and Miami.

The early attempts to grow cane on lands bordering Okeechobee met with mixed results. Inadequate drainage, high overhead costs and climatic problems (including hurricanes in 1926 and 1928) severely hampered production. Additionally, an oversupply of sugar on the world market forced many capitalists to abandon their operations.

Notwithstanding these early difficulties, commercial sugar production took hold in the Everglades, and has persisted to the present day. The success of the industry is largely a consequence of two events that occurred during the 1930s and 1940s. First, researchers developed sugarcane varieties suitable to southern Florida's climatic, biological, and agronomic conditions. Second, a
water management system was constructed to remove flood waters from agricultur­
al lands during south Florida's wet season (June - September), and conserve
excess water for the dry season (October - May).21

Florida's sugarcane industry is currently located in four contiguous
counties (Glades, Hendry, Martin, and Palm Beach) surrounding Lake Okeechobee. During the 1978-79 crop season 316,000 acres of cane were harvested for sugar, and seven sugar houses in Palm Beach and Hendry Counties ground out 972,000 short tons.22 Florida, one of only four sugarcane growing states in the Union (Louisiana, Texas, Hawaii) presently produces 17 percent of U.S. output.23

Conclusions

Sugar, a location-specific commodity, has exhibited a high degree of
locational change throughout its commercial history in Florida. However, the peripatetic industry now appears to have settled in the Everglades. Conditions there compare favorably with Louisiana, the other major cane producing state. The Everglades has a growing season longer then Louisiana's, and it produces a higher yielding cane. Florida's role as a supplier of domestic sugar has in­
creased in recent years, and the Everglades cane industry anticipates capturing a greater share of the future market. Thus, it appears that the state's sugar
industry, so long characterized by spatial instability, has at last found a
permanent home.

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2. L. C. Gray, History of Agriculture in the Southern United States to 1860,

3. The territory acquired by Great Britain from Spain and France under provi­sions of the 1763 Treaty of Paris was divided into the two provinces of East
and West Florida. The former consisted of the Florida peninsula and the main­
land west from the Atlantic coast as far as the Apalachicola River. Land be­
tween the Apalachicola and the Mississippi River delta comprised West Florida.
C. L. Mowat, East Florida as a British Province, 1763 - 1784 (Gainesville,
Also, Craig Miller and Patrick O'Sullivan, "The Obliteration of Colonial West

(Transcripts, Library of Congress), in W. H. Siebert, ed., Loyalists in East
Florida, 1774 to 1795, 2 vols. (Deland, Florida: The Florida State Historical

5. C. Doggett, Dr. Andrew Turnbull and the New Smyrna Colony of Florida

6. Published materials on the planters and plantations of Florida's first
sugarcane "empire" are numerous. The more notable works include: M. Schene,
Hopes, Dreams, and Promises: A History of Volusia County, Florida (Daytona
Beach, Florida: News-Journal Corporation, 1976), chapter 6; E. P. Stanton,
Early Plantations of the Halifax - Concerning the Ruins (Ormond Village,
Florida: Ormond Village Improvement Association, 1949); and, A. Strickland,
The Valient Pioneers: A History of Ormond Beach, Volusia County, Florida
(Miami, Florida: Center Printing Co., 1963), chapters 1 and 2.

8. Niles Register, 27 February 1836.

9. E. R. Fairbanks reported that "the sugar cane will, however, in a few years, become the staple of the Peninsula... It is now cultivated for home consumption by almost every planter, small and great; but the expense of machinery, and the time required to get underway, has deterred many from abandoning their cotton to raise cane" (DeBow's Review, January 1848, p. 12).


11. Other plantations along the Manatee River were operated by Dr. Joseph Braden and Hector Braden, and Josiah Gates. For a comprehensive description of the settling of the Manatee River area, see L. B. McDuffie, The Lure of Manatee (Bradenton, Florida: Manatee County Historical Society, 1961).


13. Ibid.


15. Ninth United States Census - 1870, Table IV - Productions of Agriculture in Each State and Territory (by Counties), for the Census Year Ended June 1, 1870, Sugar and Molasses (Florida), p. 119.


17. Ibid., p. 362.


22. Ibid., pp. 9-10.

23. Ibid., p. 7.