

To the Field! An Introduction to the 2014 Tampa AAG Meeting Field Trips

When the Association of American Geographers (AAG) announced plans to hold its annual meeting in Tampa during April 2014, many Tampa Bay area geographers surely felt simultaneous excitement to have the meeting in their back yard—and dread that they would inevitably be asked to pour much time and energy into supporting the meeting (local arrangements committee, meetings to organize nearly a thousand “orphan papers” into semi-coherent sessions, leading field trips, and so forth). Despite being on the verge of overtaking New York as the nation’s third most populous state, the AAG had not met in Florida since its 1991 meeting in Miami, so this was certainly a rare opportunity. Indeed, I recall chatting with Craig Colten (Carl O. Sauer professor of geography at LSU) more than a decade ago about his experience with the 2003 AAG meeting in New Orleans. At that time, Colten advocated that geographers embrace the opportunity to host an AAG meeting rather than continuing to focus on research and writing. Accordingly, I dove in headfirst, offering to organize and help lead five field trips during the 2014 AAG meeting in Tampa. At first I thought it might be possible to prepare a hard copy, special edition of the *Florida Geographer*, one that featured papers on each planned field trip. I am likely the last living member of both the Florida Society of Geographers and the AAG to discover that not only had the *Florida Geographer* recently transitioned to an open access, electronic format—the AAG prints very little in hard copy any more: its monthly newsletters and more frequent news alerts, journals (*Annals*, *Professional Geographer*, and *AAG Review of Books*), AAG meeting program, occasional communications, and so forth are all delivered electronically.* Still, I clung to the notion that field trips should have some material people can consult during and after the trip. Most 2014 field trip leaders were hard pressed just to prepare for the field trips themselves (let alone preparing detailed manuscripts about their sites), so I have contented myself with assembling “a representative sample” of 2014 Tampa meeting field trip papers. Indeed, I managed only two papers based on my five field trips.

Geographers know that field work and field experience long pre-dates the establishment of geography as a formal academic discipline more than a century ago. Indeed, in 2001, the *Geographical Review* published a series of 57 essays from a host of authors about doing field work (see the introduction in DeLeyser and Starrs, 2001). Furthermore, John Fraser Hart (1982, p.24) once opined that “We cannot understand an area until we have explored it for ourselves. Of course we read what others have written about it, but we remain uneasy with our knowledge until we have had a chance to test it in the field.” Accordingly, field trips have been a mainstay of virtually every geography conference for a long time. More than a decade after Craig Colten encouraged me to think of the 2014 AAG meeting in Tampa as more blessing than curse, he added in a conversation during that meeting that leading good field trips establishes a geographer at the pinnacle of their profession.

While I cannot vouch for the quality of any 2014 Tampa AAG meeting field trips, I can vouch for the following papers—all of which not only document some of the 26 field trips during the 2014 AAG meeting, but also provide more detail about the places visited (AAG, 2014). Of course, most field trips were to sites in the immediate Tampa Bay area. Yet the conference also featured trips to a handful of sites a bit further afield including the geomorphology of Sea Horse and Cedar Keys; the collection of Frank Lloyd Wright architecture at Florida Southern College in Lakeland; the new urbanist community of Celebration (adjacent to and developed by Walt

Disney Company); and Homosassa Springs. For this special section of the *Florida Geographer*, we feature papers outlining important geographic issues at four different sites. In the first paper, Shawn Landry provides a richly detailed essay based on his field trip entitled “Trees in the City of Tampa: Tour of Urban Forest Management, Monitoring, and Policy.” His paper outlines Tampa’s twentieth century development and loss of tree cover, and then evolving efforts over the past few decades to maintain trees despite increasing urbanization—including discussion of the city’s recently adopted urban forest management plan. The second paper is about Jennifer Collins and Charles Paxton’s field trip to the beaches of Pinellas County’s popular Fort De Soto Park. Collins, Paxton and co-author Bryon Middlekauff review the historical significance of Fort De Soto as well as the physical processes that shape beach environments (especially in the Tampa Bay area), including artificial beach nourishment activity by people. The third paper is about the Hillsborough River, which rises near the southeastern edge of central Florida’s Green Swamp and ultimately flows through downtown Tampa. Russell Fielding led a canoe/kayak trip down a portion of the Hillsborough River, featuring discussion of local biogeography and some urban development. I had also planned a Hillsborough River experience in which participants were to walk and learn about the City of Tampa’s efforts to redevelop its riverfront into a pedestrian friendly environment, visit a portion of the river used for Tampa’s water supply, and then canoe through a much less developed (but recreationally significant) portion of the river. As it happens, my trip was cancelled due to lightning—but I prepared a paper dealing with three different reaches of the Hillsborough River. Finally, I crafted another paper about Homosassa Springs. On the trip, I discussed flood insurance and sea level rise in some detail, and we heard from state park officials who discussed manatees and other wildlife; but I did not say much in the field about springs, a deficiency I try to remedy in the fourth paper in this collection.

Preparing and leading field trips for a knowledgeable audience is a challenging task to be sure; and writing something insightful about these places even more so. Many thanks to all those who led field trips during the 8-12 April 2014 AAG conference in Tampa—and especially to those who helped document some of this effort with the papers that follow. It has been a remarkable learning and sharing journey.

AAG members can still receive hard copies of the *Annals of the Association of American Geographers and Professional Geographer* if they so choose.

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References

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