FORGOTTEN PIONEER:

The Legacy of

CAPTAIN

WILLIAM C. VALENTINE

by Rodney E. Dillon, Jr. and Joe Knetsch

Early accounts of Fort Lauderdale’s history which appeared in local newspapers and tourist publications during the first half of the twentieth century almost always presented Frank Stranahan as the city’s “first permanent white settler.” As with all claims of being “the first,” “the biggest,” or “the oldest,” this contention has been subject to various challenges and modifications through the years. In recent decades, historians have documented a parade of non-Indian settlers arriving in the area between the 1790s and the 1890s. Some, who, like the ill-fated Cooley family, ended their lives in what is today Fort Lauderdale, can undoubtedly be classified as “permanent” residents. Even when we discount these early pioneers in order to establish an unbroken chain of settlement to the present day, Stranahan’s claim has its challengers. Perhaps the most substantial claim to the honor of “first permanent white resident” of “modern” Fort Lauderdale and Broward County, is held by William C. Valentine, a man often forgotten in accounts of the city’s past, and, when remembered, often unfairly portrayed as a drunkard and a buffoon.

Little is known about the early life and career of this remarkable man. From the few accounts available, he appears to have been born in either Virginia or Louisiana in 1840 or 1841. His obituary states that he “served with distinction” in the Confederate Army while a resident of Louisiana, but no record of his service has yet been located. The nicknames by which he was known in Fort Lauderdale—“Captain,” “Cap,” and “Colonel”—may suggest a military background, or, more likely, were simply used as terms of respect, as was common in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century South. He reportedly moved to Florida after the war, settling at Cisco in Marion County.

The first known documentation

Surprisingly little biographical information is readily available about many of Broward County’s late nineteenth century pioneers. In the case of William C. Valentine, this deficiency is compounded by the fact that much of what little has been written represents him as an inebriate, a clown, or both. This reevaluation examines Valentine’s noteworthy contributions as a pioneer settler, surveyor, and public servant, and documents the high regard in which he was held by his contemporaries, including some of southeast Florida’s most prominent residents. In addition, it makes the case that this “forgotten pioneer” may have been the “first permanent white settler” of Fort Lauderdale and Broward County in the post-Seminole War era.

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of Valentine’s activities on the state’s southeastern coast appears in 1887, when he wrote the Commissioner of State Lands in Tallahassee from Hypoluxo, inquiring under “what conditions intending Settlers can enter the lands reserved for the canal company in the country along or in the vicinity of New River.” His clear handwriting and careful wording indicate a man of some education, and his presence on the frontier and interest in land suggest that he already had experience as a surveyor and civil engineer. Certainly, he was familiar with the activities of the Florida Coast Line Canal and Transportation Company, which had been chartered six years earlier to dredge connecting links between the natural waterways which lined the east coast. By 1887, dredging work had progressed as far south as the Indian River region.  

On June 27, 1889, Valentine wrote to Surveyor General William D. Bloxham, requesting the cost of field notes for Township 50 South, Ranges 42 and 43 East—the portion of what is today Broward County between Sunrise Boulevard in Fort Lauderdale and Sterling Road in Dania running eastward from present Highway 441 to the ocean. He gave his address as Zion, a post office established the previous year which would eventually merge with Hypoluxo, and he described his residence as twenty-five miles from the post office. From this description, he may have already located in present-day Broward County by this date.  

Three weeks later, Valentine again wrote Bloxham from Zion, this time ordering a certified copy of the field notes and map with the explanation, “I am a Surveyor, and wish to find or replace the original stakes on disputed lines, and as the Stakes and marks left by the government surveyors are gone or obliterated.” His surveying activities in Broward at this early date raise the question as to whom he was surveying for. The most likely answer would be the canal company, but at this time no documentation to confirm this speculation has surfaced.

On October 25, 1890, Valentine applied to the Trustees of the Internal Improvement Fund for Lots 2 and 5 in Section 13, Township 50 South, Range 42 East. For a cash payment of $12.68, he was issued Certificate No. 10 on this piece of property, which cost a total of $126.75 and was located at what later became known as Burnham’s Point, in the present Harbor Beach area of Fort Lauderdale.  

As mentioned previously, Valentine may have already been living in the vicinity of New River; if not, he apparently moved there shortly after acquiring this property. He had definitely established his residence there by August 18, 1891. On that date, the United States government established a post office at the Fort Lauderdale House of Refuge, which for five years had served as a way-station on the “Barefoot Mailman” route from Lake Worth to Biscayne Bay, and appointed Valentine as the first postmaster.  

According to later accounts, Valentine apparently made his home at the House of Refuge during his tenure as postmaster. According to tradition, he kept the mail in a cigar box. During this time, he became close friends with the keeper of the House of Refuge, Captain Dennis O’Neill, who was the only other white resident in the area. Although life at the isolated station must have been solitary at times, his duties allowed Valentine the opportunity to make the acquaintance of a number of southeast Florida’s early pioneers, including the Barefoot Mailmen themselves and a number of settlers who trekked the beach between Dade County’s two main communities, those at Lake Worth and Biscayne Bay. Several of these connections would have a significant impact on Valentine’s future career.

One particularly close friendship which developed during these years was with Frederick S. Morse, a Boston native who had settled on Biscayne Bay in the mid-1880s. Morse enjoyed the free-wheeling life afforded by the wilderness, and spent much time in the company of his fellow bachelors, Valentine and O’Neill, at the Fort Lauderdale House of Refuge. In succeeding years, Morse would serve as Dade County’s representative in the Florida State Legislature, enter the real estate business, and become one of the leading figures in the development of southeast Florida. Another of Valentine’s early and influential friends was Mary Brickell, who, with her husband William, had arrived in the early 1870s. Mr. Brickell operated the Indian trading post at the mouth of the Miami River, while his wife concentrated on amassing large tracts of land both there and along the New River.
Eighteen ninety-two and 1893 witnessed the construction of a Dade County road between Lantana and Lemon City, the establishment of a ferry crossing over the New River, and the inauguration of the Bay Biscayne Stage Line, all of which served to open present-day Broward County to the "outside world" and stimulate the growth of the Lake Worth and Biscayne Bay settlements. Mary Brickell, ever mindful of property values and the potential for development, hired Valentine to survey a tract of land on Little River in November 1892. Valentine himself evidently made use of the improved transportation facilities of the day. The Tropical Sun noted in April 1893 that his "many friends" were "pleased to see him up from his New River home....His visits are all too infrequent."  

The completion of the county road also shifted the focus of activity and the hub of transportation in the Fort Lauderdale area from the beach to the river crossing. As a result, the Barefoot Mailman route was discontinued and the mail contract was awarded to the new stagecoach line. Consequently, Frank Stranahan replaced William C. Valentine as postmaster on January 24, 1894, and moved the cigar box post office to the overnight camp he operated at the ferry crossing.  

In the meantime, Valentine continued his survey work. On November 3, 1893, he completed a survey of the Jonathan Lewis Donation, a Miami area property acquired by the Brickells with a title which dated back to 1824, but which was still in dispute. The following month, Jacksonville attorney P. A. Cunningham wrote to the Surveyor General, expressing interest in "a small island or shoal in New River Sound," and requesting that it be surveyed. Cunningham had been a principal with Duncan U. Fletcher in the Florida Fiber Company's sisal plantation on Middle River, and had therefore been familiar with the Fort Lauderdale area for several years. In asking for the survey of this island, he noted that there was "only one surveyor on this river — Mr. Valentine." In the spring of
1894, Valentine surveyed several portions of a pioneer Biscayne Bay homestead, that of Michael Oxar, which had been purchased by Mrs. Brickell. At the same time, the former postmaster remained involved in the civic affairs of the tiny New River community. On October 5, 1894, the Dade County Commission appointed him clerk of the election board for District Six, the New River Precinct. Frank Stranahan, House of Refuge Keeper Dennis O’Neill, and “Count” James Nugent, who were with one or two possible exceptions the only other men living in the precinct, were appointed election board inspectors. The post office — Stranahan’s trading post — was designated the poll.

As the tiny settlement coalesced around the county road and its New River crossing, forces were already in motion which would change the region’s character forever. Even before Henry Flagler’s railroad reached West Palm Beach in 1894, Guy Metcalfe’s *Tropical Sun*, with possible inside knowledge, noted that the rails would eventually be extended to Miami, a statement which became reality in late 1895 and early 1896. Cap Valentine was among the handful of pioneers to welcome the first train into Fort Lauderdale on February 22, 1896. The arrival of the railroad proved a tremendous benefit to many early residents of the extreme southeastern coast, including Mary Brickell, whose vast real estate holdings skyrocketed in value as a result of the access and potential buyers it brought. William Valentine’s old crony, Fred Morse, after completing his term in the legislature, sought employment with the railroad and eventually became its right-of-way man for southern Florida and the leading local land agent for Flagler’s interests and the canal company. In 1896, he was instrumental in the incorporation of Miami and was elected president of the first city council.

Valentine’s connections to these prominent individuals, his experience as a surveyor and civil engineer, and his position as a local civic leader insured that he, too, would share in the benefits of this new wave of activity. In May 1895, the month before it was officially announced that the railroad would be extended to Miami, Valentine surveyed a tract of land on Biscayne Bay which Mrs. Brickell had purchased from William T. Pent and wished to plat. While he had performed surveys for Mrs. Brickell in the past, and while this particular contract was not directly tied to the railroad, there can be no doubt that the anticipated arrival of the rails had awakened unprecedented interest in real estate throughout the country between West Palm Beach and Miami.

That this interest and activity only mushroomed with the construction, completion, and operation of the railroad extension is evident from the number of plats filed in Dade County in the last years of the 1890s. Surveyors whose names appear most frequently on these plats were those connected with the railroad and its ancillary land companies. Among them were A. L. Knowlton, Franklin Sheene, George O. Butler, and W. C. Valentine. In his 1895 plat of the town of Fort Lauderdale, Knowlton acknowledged Valentine’s position as one of that settlement’s earliest and most prominent residents by naming a street (today’s Northeast and Southeast Third Avenue) Valentine Avenue. October of 1895 found Valentine surveying a subdivision along the forks of the Miami River. By November he was surveying plats of lots on property owned by his friend Fred Morse in the area directly west of Miami. In April 1896, his survey of the town of North Miami was platted by Robbins, Graham and Chillingworth, the West Palm Beach law firm which did much of the title work for the F.E.C. Railway. North Miami would be advertised in the late 1890s as “The Thriving Suburb.” The Dade County plat book also recorded Valentine’s spring and summer 1896 survey of the town of Modelo—today’s Dania—performed for the Model Land Company, the largest of Flagler’s land organizations. The company’s intention to populate the town with a colony of Danes from Wisconsin is echoed in the street names shown on the original plat, including Viking Court, Denmark Street, Thorvaldsen Avenue, Milwaukee Avenue, and Huron Street. According to one early account, Valentine hired young Fort Lauderdale pioneers Frank Oliver and L. W. Bracknell to assist with his work at Modelo.

The September 30, 1897 issue of *The Tropical Sun* noted that “Col. W. C. Valentine is doing some surveying for parties down in the Bay country and is at present making his headquarters in Miami.” As the southern terminus of the railroad and the site of the imposing Royal Palm Hotel, Miami was rapidly on its way to becoming south Florida’s major metropolis. Exactly which properties Valentine was surveying at this time have not been ascertained, although one was likely the Samuel Fields plat in Township 53, Range 42, for which the county plat book recorded him delineating the range line. By the end of the year, he was back in present-day Broward County, surveying the town site for another Scandinavian agricultural colony. His plat for the town of Hallandale, a primarily Swedish community, was subsequently filed by the Flagler interests and the Bost and Florida Atlantic Land Company, one of the land companies of the Florida Coast Line and Transportation Company.

Shortly after completing his Hallandale plat, Valentine again headed south, this time on a federal contract. On November 15, 1897, he had written the U.S. Surveyor General in Tallahassee, stating that he had “been employed by [the] Superintendent of 7th and 8th Lighthouse Districts to Survey Key Biscayne in townships 54 & 55, R42,” and requesting a price quote on copies of the existing field notes and survey maps. The Key Biscayne work was likely completed during the winter of 1897–98, but additional contracts kept Valentine busy most of the year. In April, he was reported staying at the homestead of Captain Fulford, keeper of the Biscayne Bay House of Refuge, “with a large force of men,” while surveying the Snake Creek area, a project Valentine anticipated would “keep him in this neighborhood for some time.” By July, however, he...
was back home at New River, surveying a plat for land bordering the river's forks, a region which, as a result of the activities of pioneers such as the Bryan and Marshall families, was becoming prime agricultural property. 27

In the opening years of the twentieth century, Valentine seems to have limited his surveying to work performed for his old friend and frequent employer Mary Brickell. During the summers of 1900, 1901, and 1902, he traveled to Miami to survey and subdivide for Mrs. Brickell portions of the Polly Lewis Donation property. 28 Advancing age may have been a factor in Valentine's curtailing of his survey activities, but the primary reason appears to have been his burgeoning tomato farming enterprise on the north fork of the New River. Henry Flagler himself had envisioned the present-day Broward County region as the agricultural center of southeast Florida, and the arrival of his railroad had indeed transformed Fort Lauderdale from an isolated river crossing and beachfront outpost to a flourishing center for truck farming. Valentine had cleared fifteen acres for cultivation as early as December 1898, and reported two tomato crops covering a total of six acres the following year. While turning the focus of his activities from surveying to farming, Valentine continued his services as a local election official, serving as clerk of voting Precinct No. 7, based at Stranahan's store. 29

The problems which the region's frequently flooded conditions caused area farmers, and the desire of inland settlers for more convenient access to the sea embroiled Valentine in controversy near the beginning of the new century. About 1899, a group of Fort Lauderdale citizens led by Edwin T. King excavated an inlet for New River at the old Indian Haulover just south of present-day Bahia Mar. Until that time, the river had followed the East Coast Canal south to the ancient inlet south of Dania. Valentine at first strenuously opposed this venture, according to one account rowing out to meet King's party with an assistant and guns, but was persuaded to share a drink with the excavators and join them in their labor. His initial opposition has been attributed to his allegedly cantankerous nature and a desire to preserve the privacy of his Burnham's Point retreat. However, his experience as a civil engineer and his thorough knowledge of the river, the canal, and surrounding waters may have convinced him of the folly of the project. Indeed, the inlet subse-

sequently closed several times, and had to be completely re-excavated in 1923. In the years after the opening of Port Everglades diverted the main discharge from New River, this inlet closed entirely. 30

Valentine's comings and goings were also frequently chronicled in the area's two closest newspapers, The Tropical Sun and the Miami Metropolis, indicating his standing in the community and his wide circle of friends and acquaintances. In January 1902, while reporting marriages of Fort Lauderdale couples, the Tropical Sun commented, "We hear there is a Jack for every Jill. We wonder if there's not Jill for poor old Bill," apparently a gentle teasing of Valentine for his longstanding bachelorhood. 31

The couples mentioned above had journeyed to southeast Florida's population centers to take their vows, D. H. Powell and J. D. Rouse, for example, having married in Palm Beach and Miami, respectively. Although he was to remain a bachelor for life, Valentine participated in the first wedding actually performed in Fort Lauderdale as the officiating justice of the peace. The couple, Frank R. Oliver and Eva Bryan, were married in a rowboat tied up at the captain's residence, probably his Harbor Beach

September 1900 Army Corps of Engineers survey showing the recently-excavated New River Inlet.
homestead. The details of this event, which has become a part of Fort Lauderdale's legend, were first reported in an article written for the Tropical Sun by "W.H.M.," most likely Fort Lauderdale's future first mayor, William H. Marshall.32

William C. Valentine's colorful career and many contributions to south Florida's early history came to a tragic end on March 28, 1903, when he drowned in the New River. As the contemporary newspaper accounts relate, Valentine and a group of his hired men had traveled down river in a small boat from his tomato farm to Stranahan's trading post. On their return journey, shortly after 10:00 p.m., Valentine stood up in the boat and lost his balance, falling overboard. His companions managed to pull him back into the boat, but he again stood, "wiping the water from his face and eyes, being somewhat exhausted and excited," and again fell overboard. This time one of the men in the boat plunged into the river after him, swimming alongside and keeping him afloat for as long as possible "without sacrificing his own life also." Those efforts failed however, and Valentine slipped below the surface. His body was not recovered until noon of the following day. In assessing the cause of Valentine's fatal mishap, it must be remembered that New River in the days before Everglades drainage was a deep, swift-moving stream, characterized by dangerous whirlpools and underturbulences which sometimes proved hazardous even to small boats.33

Valentine's funeral, held at the Edward Nelson Undertaking Parlor and Furniture Store in Miami on April 6, demonstrated the high regard in which he was held throughout the region. The services, conducted by Reverend F. Pasco of downtown Miami's Methodist Church South, were well attended, and adorned with a number of impressive floral offerings, including a large, crescent-shaped arrangement contributed by Mary Brickell. The burial was in the Miami City Cemetery.34

Valentine's close friends, Frank Stranahan, Dennis O'Neill, and Fred Morse, took charge of his effects after his death, and located a will among his papers. He had bequeathed all of his property to Mrs. Kate C. Henle of Cisco. At this time, his relationship to Mrs. Henle is not known.35

In later years, after Fort Lauderdale had become a progressive and "civilized" city, "Cap" Valentine's contributions were often forgotten. When he was mentioned, emphasis was usually placed on his rough manners and alleged intemperance. Stories of drinking binges enjoyed by Fort Lauderdale's first postmaster and House of Refuge keeper O'Neill when their government paychecks arrived were told, embellished, and found their way into print. One tale paints a colorful picture of a comical Valentine scrambling to avoid an attack on his bald head by dive-bombing bluejays during Fort Lauderdale's first election, which took place outdoors. The story of Cap's reluctant assistance with the excavation of New River inlet, of his hermit-like life at his Burnham's Point homestead, and of course the circumstances of his death were told and retold until he became enshrined in the city's early lore as a sort of bumbling, drunken clown.36

That these stories contained a kernel of truth cannot be denied, as alcohol was in great demand and abundantly used on an isolated frontier which offered few other diversions. And the rugged, primarily male society of the region at that time lent itself to rough humor and highjinks indulged in by all but the most reserved and dour of south Florida's pioneers.37 But while these tales are entertaining, and to a degree indicative of life on the frontier, they should not be allowed to obscure the very solid accomplishments of William C. Valentine, an intelligent, energetic, and in many ways far-thinking man, whose activities as a surveyor, civil engineer, public official, and, in all probability, "modern" Fort Lauderdale and Broward County's first permanent white settler, blazed the trail which led to today's city and county.

Notes

1 "Fort Lauderdale's First Citizen," Fort Lauderdale Daily News, August 4, 1925; Sara M. Crim, "The Story of Lauderdale," Fort Lauderdale Daily News, August 8, 1940; L. W. Collier, The Pocket History of Fort Lauderdale (Fort Lauderdale, c.1940), 44-48.
2 The earliest documented non-Indian settlers in present Broward County were the Surles Lewis family, who arrived sometime in the 1780s and were well established on the New River by 1793. Lewis died probably in the 1810s, and his widow Frankee relocated to the Biscayne Bay area in the 1820s. In the 1790s and 1890s, Broward County Historian Cooper Kirk did exhaustive research on William Cooley, who arrived with his family in 1824, and headed a settlement consisting of some sixty to seventy residents. For additional information, see Richard K. Murdoch, "Documents Concerning a Voyage to the Miami Region in 1793," Brouard Legacy, vol. 3, nos. 3-4 (Fall 1979), 32-37; "The Lewis Settlement on New River: A Newly-Discovered Document," Brouard Legacy, vol. 13, nos. 3-4 (Summer-Fall 1990), 44; Cooper Kirk, "William Cooley: Brouard's Legend," part 1, Brouard Legacy, vol. 1, no. 1 (October 1976), 12-20, and part 2, vol. 1, no. 2 (January 1977), 24-36.
3 The 1900 Federal Census lists his birthplace as Louisiana and the year as 1841. His 1903 obituary says he was born in Virginia "about 65 years ago," and moved to Louisiana before the Civil War. Twelfth U.S. Census, Population Schedules, Dade County, Florida, 1900; Miami Metropolis, April 10, 1903.
4 Miami Metropolis, April 10, 1903; The Louisiana Department of Archives has no record of Valentine's service in a unit from that state during the war, nor does he appear in Florida's Confederate pension application records or the National Archives compiled service records of Confederate soldiers. This does not necessarily mean that he did not serve; his name may be listed incorrectly or in an unusual variation, or he may have served in a militia or irregular unit.
5 W. C. Valentine to Commissioner of State Lands, undated, in 1887 file, series 914, carton 46, Florida State Archives, Tallahassee; "The Early Years of the East Coast


- Valentine to Bloxham, July 18, 1889, Miscellaneous Letters, vol. 15.

- Certificate for Land Purchased from the Trustees of the Internal Improvement Fund of Florida, Department of Natural Resources, Tallahassee.

- Bradbury and Hallock, Chronology of Florida Post Offices, 31; August Burghard and Philip Weidling, Checkered Sunshine (Gainesville, 1966), 12-15; There are many sources of information on the famous "Barefoot Mailman," including a popular novel by Theodore Pratt. The best first-hand account is contained in Charles W. Pierce's manuscript at the Historical Society of Palm Beach County, West Palm Beach. A condensed version of the manuscript was published as Pioneer Life in Southeast Florida, ed. by Donald Walter Curi (Coral Gables, 1970).


- Certificate for Land Purchased From Trustees; Juno Tropical Sun, July 14, 1892.

- Dade County Plat Book B, 12; Tropical Sun, April 6, 1893; Charles W. Pierce, "The Adventures of Charles Pierce in Broward County One Hundred Years Ago," (reprint from the Pierce M.S.), part 2, Broward Legacy, vol. 9, nos. 1-2 (Winter/Spring 1986), 29-31.


- Tropical Sun, October 11, 1894.

- "Railroad Through the Wilderness: The Florida Times-Union Reports the Arrival of the Florida East Coast Railway Through Broward County,” Broward Legacy, vol. 15, nos. 3-4 (Summer-Fall 1992), 38-44; Blackman, Miami and Dade County, 125-26; Crim, "Story of Lauderdale,” chapter VII.

- Dade County Plat Book B, 11.

- Dade County Plat Books A and B; the Knowton plat of Fort Lauderdale is recorded in Book B, 40.

- Dade County Plat Book B, 10; Dade County Plat Book A, 49, 55; John Sewell, Miami Memoirs, comp, and ed. by Arva Moore Parks (Miami, 1987), 77-79.


- Tropical Sun, September 30, 1897.

- Dade County Plat Book B, 6; Blackman, Miami and Dade County, 18-20; Florida Times-Union, April 14, 1896.


- Valentine to U.S. Surveyor General, November 15, 1897, Miscellaneous Letters, vol. 21.

- Miami Metropolis, April 8, 1898.


- Dade County Plat Book B, 74, 96; Miami Metropolis, June 6, 1902.


- Tropical Sun, January 10, 1902.

- Tropical Sun, January 3, 1902, January 24, 1902.

- Miami Metropolis, April 10, 1903; Tropical Sun, April 1, 1903; Florida Times-Union, March 30, 1903; Lawrence E. Will, Okeechobee Boats and Skippers (St. Petersburg, 1966), 73-81.

- Miami Metropolis, April 10, 1903; Miami City Cemetery Records.

- Ibid.


- Accounts of these aspects of life on the frontier can be found in a number of primary sources, including contemporary newspapers, the Pierce Manuscript, and Ralph Middleton Munroe and Vincent Gilpin, The Commodore's Story (Miami, 1966).