Although Broward County, Florida, only assumed corporate existence in 1915, the fluid flow of settlement on the skirts of the Everglades in the county resulted in cohesive, unincorporated communities that flourished and perished as floods of immigrants moved on in their search for stability and prosperity. Who today is aware of the life in the pre-land boom settlements of Pembroke, Whidby, Griffin, Progresso, Pelham, and Colohatee? Yet these were all Broward communities with civic infrastructures recognized and commented upon by travelers and the news media.

Ranking with these communities in population, but exceeding them in land area, was an area located south of State Road 84 and west of Dania known as the “Dania District.” In describing and documenting the historicity of this area, only a summary of the preliminary findings follow.

When a Spanish mission arose on the Miami River in the mid-1560s, the padres came into contact and conflict with the indigenous Tequesta Indians. As testimony to the extent of Tequesta habitation, significant aboriginal artifacts have been uncovered in Broward County, and the artifacts now being unearthed in the “Dania District” may fall into this category.1

Prior to 1793, the Charles and Frankee Lewis family settled on the south fork of New River and established a plantation. Although the exact outlines of the central Lewis settlement have not been determined, certainly the outer extremities of this pioneer effort impinged upon the property under investigation. A description of improvements made by the Lewises has been handed down by Spanish officials who came to the Lewis settlement in 1793 to arrest the family members and to transport them in irons to St. Augustine for interrogation/imprisonment. Spanish officials Sebastian Verezaluz and Don William Hambly reported to the governor at St. Augustine that the Lewis installations included a house, blacksmith shop, chicken coup, and plantation.2

Charles Lewis died prior to 1819, but widow Frankee Lewis received a donation of a section of land from the United States government in 1823. This unsurveyed donation passed into the hands of Richard Fitzpatrick, noted Florida entrepreneur, in 1830 upon the payment of $400 to the widow. Fitzpatrick, who would sponsor the creation of Dade County in 1836, brought Negro slaves onto his property, cleared land and raised rice and sugar cane.3

Prior to Fitzpatrick’s acquisition of his New River plantation, William Cooley settled on New River across from the Lewis holdings. Around him grew up the New River Settlement, which by 1836 housed approximately sixty inhabitants, including white masters and Negro slaves. Exotic New River attracted naturalists and travelers who studied the flora and fauna of the area adjacent to the river as well as the habits of the Creek and Seminole Indians who resided near its banks. In 1834 the well-known botanist Dr. Edward Frederick Leitner made extensive notes on the soil, topography, and flora/fauna of “upper” New River. Even earlier, in 1829, Charleston medical doctor and newspaper man Benjamin Strobel explored the New River area and published an account of aspects of Indian life. William Wade Rigby and his family settled on the south fork of New River on the Lewis plantation in 1830. Sometime before 1836, William died and apparently was buried along the river, the first American to be interred on this stream.4

On January 6, 1836, nine days after the outbreak of the Second Seminole War, Indians from the south fork of New River massacred five members of the Cooley household and destroyed the New River Settlement.5

Rampaging Indians from New River wreaked havoc throughout thinly settled south Florida and drove all whites to Indian Key and Key West. To end the Indian depredations the United States government in October 1836 sent 153 officers and men to New River.
Ironically, the "Dania District," an economic and population center in the first decades of the twentieth century, is today one of the few undeveloped properties in eastern Broward County. County Historian Cooper Kirk began his research into the "Dania District" as part of a study assembled by Alandco Properties, current owners of a portion of the district. Using contemporary newspaper accounts and government documents, Dr. Kirk has reconstructed the history of a "lost civilization," a once-thriving community bypassed by the rapid development which has characterized the eastern part of Broward County since the 1920s.

In its most prosperous years, the "Dania District" was the site not only of farms and groves, but also of a substantial packing house and two platted towns. Today, a number of manmade landmarks, including the Dania Cut-off Canal, and Griffin, Stirling and Tram roads give silent testimony to the period when the "Dania District" was the most productive agricultural area between Palm Beach and Miami. As this article demonstrates, despite the numerous existing publications on Broward's past, much of the county's history remains to be discovered and written.

to engage the hostile redmen. Commanded by United States naval lieutenant Levin M. Powell, the naval detachment destroyed an Indian camp on the south forks of New River, but caught no sight of the vanished redmen.6

Major William Lauderdale of Tennessee built a fort at the confluence of the north and south forks of New River in March 1838. Likewise he destroyed a deserted Indian village on the south fork of the river.7

The sanguinary Seminole War ended in 1842, and the military establishment known as Fort Lauderdale was abandoned. But meantime the Frankee Lewis donation passed from the hands of Fitzpatrick to those of his sister, Harriet English of South Carolina. Because the donation had not been located by survey, the State of Florida sent surveyor George MacKay to New River in April 1845 to survey the donation so that the land might be patented to Harriet English. MacKay surveyed the area where Fitzpatrick had located his plantation and more. But eventually MacKay located the Lewis Donation on New River near the Atlantic Ocean. This initial survey of land in present Broward County was followed in 1870 by an extensive survey by Marcellus Williams, who held a state contract to survey from south of Biscayne Bay to Lake Worth. Williams incorporated the MacKay survey into his own. Twelve years later, Dr. James A. Henshall, on a leisurely southern cruise, described in detail the topography and flora situated along and adjacent to the south fork of New River.8

When the United States acquired Florida from Spain in 1821, all the property in the newly acquired territory, with the exception of a few Spanish land grants, passed into the ownership of the national government. By the provisions of the Swamp Act passed by Congress in 1850, all swamp and overflowed land in the states might be acquired by the states by meeting the terms of the act. To administer the swamp and overflowed lands within its boundaries, the State of Florida in 1855 created the Internal Improvement Fund, manned by the governor and members of the cabinet who were titled trustees.9

Between 1881 and 1883 the trustees of the Internal Improvement Fund sold approximately 1,000,000 acres of swamp and overflowed land to the Florida Land and Mortgage Company Limited, an aggregation of British investors headed by Sir Edward James Reed, who later obtained the crown title the Earl of Pembroke. Part of this million acre land deal lay in present Broward County, but a territory then part of Dade County.10

Dania was settled in 1896 by Danes from Chicago, Illinois, a colony brought in by the land department of the newly constructed Florida East Coast Railway Company owned by Henry M. Flagler. A farming community grew up around and adjacent to this new settlement and became known as the "Dania District." In general, the amorphous boundaries of this district extended from present Stirling Road on the south to Florida Road 84 on the north and from just east of the Florida East Coast Railway westward for four miles. From the primal settlement until the Florida Land Boom of the 1920s, present Broward County was devoted almost entirely to the agricultural enterprise and subsequent social structure. Pioneers entered a primeval wilderness and began their civilization amid incredible hardships which broke the backs and spirits of all except the hardest.11

By September 1897, John W. Mulliken of Ewing, Kentucky, with only an ax and a handsaw, had cleared four acres of land in the "Dania District,"

John W. Mulliken, first settler of the "Dania District" and later mayor of Dania.
thus becoming the first to settle there. Within months he was followed by John M. Bryan, Jr., of Kissimmee, Florida, and Dr. O.W. Beed and T.J. West of Hampton, Iowa. These hardy pioneers cleared land and planted citrus groves in the area between what became Stirling and Griffin roads. But along the northern periphery of the district and located on the south fork of New River, Lewis W. Marshall of Hahira, Georgia, had settled in 1895 and immediately began to produce superior crops of tomatoes and mixed vegetables.

As an indication of their industry, by 1899, part time agriculturists Beed and West had installed a “modern” irrigation system for the 1,700 citrus trees located on their grove on “Tiger Tail Hammock,” an elevation named in honor of a Seminole chief.13

Matthew A. “Mack” Marshall, or “M. A.,” as he was more familiarly known, nephew of Lewis W. Marshall, migrated to Fort Lauderdale from Lowndes County, Georgia, in the fall of 1899 and shortly thereafter began to farm in the “Dania District.” In early 1904, he constructed the 60x100 foot Osceola Packing House on the south fork of New River, the largest packing house in the area south of the south fork and designed to handle the production of the “Dania District.” Within months, railroad magnate Henry M. Flagler and other railroad men visited the packing house and district to inspect the agricultural enterprise. Settlers from many parts of the nation moved into the district. To capitalize on the settlement, Marshall acquired ownership and/or rights to over 2,000 acres. In association with small farmers and tenant farmers, Marshall became the dominant agriculturist in the district.14

Before December 1903, Marshall and four partners had incorporated the Osceola Fruit and Vegetable Association, capitalized at $10,000. All this after a voluntary association by the same name had disbanded. As stated in the legal notification of incorporation, the principal business of the association consisted in buying, selling, packing and shipping fruits and vegetables. Ancillary to the purpose was the buying and selling of crating materials, fertilizer, tools, agricultural implements and machinery. Other business transacted by the association included the purchase, rental, leasing, selling, “or otherwise acquiring or disposing of Real Estate…”15

On September 6, 1904, the Dade County Board of Commissioners, in response to a petition signed by Marshall and forty-five others, agreed to build a public road from “a point on New River known as Osceola Camp to Dania,” the first public road completed in present Broward County. The road was surveyed and platted by L. McDonald, county surveyor. For the private use of the affected farmers, the commissioners approved a privately funded and constructed “tram road” to parallel the public road. The affected farmers were required to maintain the tram road since it was for their benefit.16

In 1906, powerful political leader John M. Bryan, Sr., of Kissimmee, purchased the “Tiger Tail Hammock” grove and property from Beed and West. In conjunction with his son, whose property was contiguous on the west, the elder Bryan expanded the Tiger Tail citrus operation until it became a model for prospective settlers and curious visitors.17

For the benefit of the settlers who flocked to the “Dania District,” the county commissioners in 1906 authorized the construction of a rock road leading from Dania to the Indian encampment known as Big City and situated where the Hollywood reservation is now located. The farmers of the district were assigned the task of raising by public subscription $1,000 of the $3,000 needed for the road. By mid-March the farmers had met their quota. Today this road is Stirling Road.18

The year 1906 was a watershed for south Florida, and for present Broward County no single year in its history is more important. On July 4, the State of Florida, under the leadership of Governor Napoleon B. Broward, began the drainage and reclamation of the hitherto almost impenetrable Everglades. The dredging of canals for this herculean project began on New River on Independence Day. Before a year had passed, the south fork of New River had been dredged through the “Dania District,” and its extension paved the way for the settlement of Davie, Florida, in 1910. The dredged river increased boat traffic and from the district farming operations, as well as providing increased drainage for the district.19

In a July 1906 issue, The Miami Metropolis proclaimed M. A. Marshall a premier farmer not only of Dade County but of the entire state, stating among other things that “Mr. Marshall has bought and controls several thousand acres of vegetable, orange, grapefruit, pineapple, peach, limes and alligator pear lands in company with A. C. Frost. Frost represents the F.E.C. Ry. Company, Boston and Florida Atlantic Coast Land Company and the Model Land Company at Dania.” Marshall sold and leased to energetic farmers. Among his clients were Reed A. Bryan and H.G. Wheeler, the former in charge of drainage operations for the state and the latter to become the owner-operator of one of the two largest mercantile businesses in Fort Lauderdale several years later. Many other less extensive farmers worked long and hot hours in the “Dania District” until it became the premier agricultural area from Miami to West Palm Beach. Among the latter was Marshall’s brother, William H., destined to become the first mayor of Fort Lauderdale in 1911, and the first state representative from Broward County in 1915.20

In an effort to divest himself of personal farming operations, in September 1909, M. A. Marshall advertised 1,120 acres of “Dania District” land for

This photo labeled “Marshell Packen House” probably depicts M.A. Marshall’s Osceola Packing House in the early 1900s. The 1893 date is incorrect.
Maps of the "Dania District" show the locations of the John M. Bryan family holdings (above) and the Reed Tract. (Maps by Kenneth J. Hughes.)
sale, "consisting of muck, hammock, high and low, pine land. Ideal property for re-subdivision in 5 and 10 acre tracts. One and one-half miles from railroad. Best of Water." Nevertheless Marshall retained a 500 acre "plantation" where he entertained on a large scale visitors and friends in his mansion dubbed "Fair Acres."21

Marshall's associate, A. C. Frost of the "Dania District," platted a new town at the time Marshall began to lessen his agricultural enterprises to concentrate on land sales. In 1909, Frost advertised 300 town lots for sale in Lakeview, and by August 1910, newsman George G. Mathews had cleared four acres, planted, and netted $1,300 from his Lakeview acreage. Lakeview lay along the east side of the Florida East Coast Railway, west of present John U. Lloyd Park on the Atlantic littoral.22

The "Dania District" also expanded northward in October 1910, when A. J. Bendle, owner of the Miami Printing Company and publisher of The Miami Metropolis, owner of the Lauderdale Realty Company, and former associate of adventurer R. P. Davie, platted and placed on the market a section of land which included acreage in Sections 10 and 15 of Township 50 South, Range 42 East. Bendle founded here a new town which he named "Lauderdale." Even before filing the plat, Bendle advertised: "Much thought has been used in the laying out of the town. A Lauderdale park and a poinciana park have been named ...", the main business street will be one hundred feet wide..." Developer Bendle predicted a population for "Lauderdale" of 5,000 within five years. By December 2, 1910, over 200 homes had been constructed in "Lauderdale" and a "tent city" arose where shelter could be rented for three dollars per week. "Lauderdale" bid fair to outdistance in population the unincorporated settlement of Fort Lauderdale, located to the north.23

By mid-1911 the huge Everglades Land and Sales Company had partially completed draining and diking over 26,000 acres, the area where the town of Davie was beginning its existence. But for the purchasers of Everglades acreage not yet drained, the company began a new but unnamed town and deed a lot so that owners might build homes. It was located just east and south of "Lauderdale." Here settlers built homes and constructed rock roads. H. G. Ralston, vice-president of the land company, engaged the Miami Floral Company to plant 7,000 ornamental shrubs and trees, including Australian pines and hibiscus plants, to spruce up the land company's "in-town" settlement. En route to their Everglades holdings, the populace of the two towns crossed the present and past Marshall property, and at the South New River Canal they took passage to their property. 'Glades land sold rapidly, evidenced by the sales company's disposal of land one day in March 1914, when of 246 men who viewed the Everglades acreage, 244 purchased 'glades land and consequently received an "intown" site on which to build and to live.24

By early 1911, Colonel Robert J. Reed had served for many years as a Chicago, Illinois, public official and most lately as a real estate operator in the Windy City in partnership with his son, Captain ("Cap") William J. Reed. Fired by reports of the fortune to be made in Everglades real estate, the Reeds in the fall of 1911 purchased 2,220 acres of land in Sections 28, 29, 31, and 32, Township 50 South, Range 42 East. Some, if not all, of this land purchase was from M. A. Marshall, who had formed the Pioneer Realty Company as the agency for his land disposal.25

The Reeds platted the tract into ten acre plots. Simultaneously they organized the Dania Improvement Association, "a cooperative body for the purpose of clearing, planting, and caring for the lands owned by those who purchased from Maine to Washington and Canada to Texas." Almost immediately, the Reeds sold to 160 "contract

Tomatoes awaiting shipment at the F.E.C. Railway's New River docks in downtown Fort Lauderdale, c. 1912.
holders of land in the "Reed Tract." One owner testified: "I drank water out of wells fifteen feet deep on your land and never drank better tasting water, infact." Contract holder Fred Randall of North East, Erie County, Pennsylvania, continued his testimonial: "... I will never be satisfied until I live there."26

"Dania District" property values rose when the first rock road to Davie was begun in December 1913. Rock from John M. Bryan, Jr.'s pit and rock excavated from the South New River Canal was used in construction of the road on new Griffin Road which opened newly settled Davie to the "Dania District" and to Davie itself.27

In a comprehensive article in The Miami Metropolis of May 1914, journalist Myrtle English described in detail the topography, settlers and method of operation of the farmers of the "Dania District." Much information is given of the settlers' background, their methods of operation, acreage production and annual profit. Her article is a veritable "who's who:" she treats of the various Marshalls, then of the Bryans, Barretts, Mullikens, Reeds, Frosts, and her list goes on.

Speaking of Reed A. Bryan and his brother-in-law, Frederick A. Barrett, she states: "[He] has one of the oldest groves, 10 acres in size, but now, in partnership with F. A. Barrett, has planted 20 acres in new trees. They are using hammock for this purpose." She painted "Cap" Reed as a large, prosperous entrepreneur: "W. J. Reed was a large grower this year. He has about 80 acres in all." Within a year Broward County was formed from Palm Beach and Dade counties, with the "Dania District" forming the heart of the new county's agricultural enterprise.28

Colonel Reed spent the summer of 1914 in Chicago and environs. Although not planned as a business vacation, Reed got in lots of licks for the Everglades as the El Dorado of America. He spoke to gatherings in Illinois, Indiana, and Ohio, and sketched a glowing future for farmers in the "Dania District," particularly those in the "Reed Tract."29

Through his speeches he sold twenty-six tracts and predicted "... quite a crowd will be down this winter who will doubtlessly buy many tracts when they see the land." To facilitate his booming land sales business, Colonel Reed moved to Fort Lauderdale in early 1914. And, son "Cap" Reed moved the next year. Preparatory to shifting to the county seat, where he would assist his father in the Reed real estate office, "Cap" put one of his "Reed Tract" homes on the selling block.30

Some idea of this property may be gleaned from the ad he placed for the sale of a part of his personal property in the "Dania District." The ad ran:

For sale or trade. House and property two miles south of town on main rock road. Property 200x1200, rock roads all around farm, land well ditched. Young lime trees out, house 28x45, screened, excellent drinking water, large new tank, electric lights, bath. Barn with servant's quarters, two stalls, room for two wagons, automobile garage, chicken house and new wired yard. A bargain. William J. Reed

The younger Reed eventually sold this homestead, and in 1916 he was elected to the first of his many terms as mayor of Fort Lauderdale. But, as the Fort Lauderdale Sentinel reported, Reed "... continue to look after his farming interests and packing house. These gentlemen [father and son] believe in extensive cultivation and building up of the soil."31

In August 1911, John M. Bryan, Sr., died at an advanced age, and the patriarch's eighty-five acre holding, known both as the "Bryan Place" and the "Tiger Tail Grove," and a property which adjoined the "Reed Tract," thereafter had a varied career. The aged widow could not maintain the vast acreage and groves. Eventually it was sold for use as a sanatorium, and large amounts of ornamental shrubbery and trees were planted as a setting for the infirm. Litigation soon engulfed the sanatorium operators, and in April 1915 the property was purchased by Mrs. C. A. Carson of Kissimmee, daughter of the Bryans.32

An infallible sign of an emerging civilization came to the "Reed Tract" on November 13, 1915, when the United States postal service began home delivery. Fred W. Jacques delivered mail in his motorcycle and side-car "through the Osceola Tract, and to the west city limits of Dania... Now the farmer can step to the road and drop his mail orders to the nearby merchants and depend upon it being filled and receiving it the next day [through the new parcel post system]. He loses no time from work and his wife does not have to look forward with 'anguish and foreboding' to a day spent in shopping. The Rural Telephone comes next."33

The outbreak of the general war in Europe in August 1914 resulted in the United States' agricultural industry reaping bonanzas in sales, and the farmers of the "Dania District" naturally shared in the general prosperity. Vegetables of all kinds flowed from the truck farms to the markets, as did castor beans, whose production skyrock-
Col. Robert J. Reed (left) and his son William J. "Cap" Reed (right) promoted the most extensive development of the "Dania District," in the 1910s.

and chickens and are doing diversified farming. It is on this tract the Everglades make their nearest approach to the coast. The muck lands coming to within three-quarters of a mile of the Dixie Highway and two and one-quarter miles of the Atlantic Ocean and at a point where the gulfstream makes its nearest approach to the coast.

Within five years of their arrival on the scene, the Reeds' prosperity and ability to transform scattered farms into a cohesive community drew the admiration of the writer and formed the basic theme of his report.39

Before the commencement of the Florida Land Boom of the early 1920s, a dramatic and permanent shift occurred within the "Dania District." Prior to 1917 most of the commercial, political, and social affairs of the district focussed in Dania. But with the completion of the Dania Cut-Off Canal in 1918, which divided the district, the inhabitants of the "Reed Tract" and lands adjacent thereto were split away from Dania affairs, and consequently their affairs focussed on Fort Lauderdale. Acting as a sort of Chinese Wall, the short canal designed to drain the "Dania District" lands and to increase prosperity, divided it and resulted in a diminution of Dania's growth and the corresponding acceleration of the growth of Fort Lauderdale, the county seat.40

Largely unknown, or else ignored, by the current populace of Broward County is the knowledge that until the Florida Land Boom almost without exception all Broward Countians

either farmed for a livelihood or else were in a large measure dependent for employment and sustenance on the agricultural enterprise.

This summary delineation of the history, culture and development of the "Dania District," which eventually focussed on the "Reed Tract," a dynamic part of the district, reveals the existence of the earliest and most concentrated farming area of present Broward County. Currently, the "Reed Tract" stands alone as the largest and best preserved agricultural area in the county, and its flora, fauna and human artifacts give eloquent testimony to the primal agricultural industry and culture of Broward County.

The Dania Cut-Off Canal soon after its completion in 1918.