A SPECIAL DOCUMENTARY FEATURE

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Though William Cool ey and Richard Fitzpatrick had suggested in the 1820s that large-scale commercial farms in south Florida might be profitable, unreliable transportation and the advent of the Second Seminole Indian War cut short their hopes of expanding upon the small coonti starch manufacturing plant on the New River. It was not until 1890 that another agricultural entrepreneur, Duncan U. Fletcher of Jackson ville, along with some financial backers, came to the region to establish what he believed would be the seed for a tremendous new industry: the cultivation and processing of hemp for use in rope and other similar textiles.

The basis for Fletcher’s dreams was the favorable comparisons which were drawn between sub-tropical Florida and similar areas in Central America. The parallels frequently appeared in his firm’s — the Florida Fiber Company — solicitation and advertising. In a 1890 prospectus, the company reported that its principals had travelled extensively:

A. Mr. J. R. Kuchler, of Jacksonville, Fla. having occasion to visit Yucatan last winter, and seeing the evidences of the enormous wealth of planters of the Sisal hemp, investigated the subject thoroughly, and finding the soil and climate about the same as that of the southern portion of this State, decided that the industry would thrive equally well here as there. On the 19th of July, 1890, a meeting of some parties interested in this matter was held in Jacksonville for the purpose of taking the necessary steps to start the enterprise; 200 shares of stock were subscribed at once, an assessment paid in to cover expenses of two men to locate suitable land, inspect personally all the Biscayne Bay country and report whether the business would be practicable. Messrs. J. R. Kuchler and P. E. Cunningham were appointed a committee to do this work, and left here August 9th, returning September 7th. They selected
1310 acres of land fronting on Middle River, in Dade county, all high and dry, as best suited for our purpose, which land we have purchased for our plantation.

Fletcher, himself, expanded upon these claims in a circular which appears to have been released in the same year:

B. These are facts that cannot be disputed, as they are taken from actual experience. The South has found the production of cotton profitable. Would not Sisal hemp be more than doubly as remunerative, owing to slight expense and larger yield. There is no reason for importing all this fiber into this country. We can make better fiber, and, with improved machinery and better labor, make it cheaper than foreign countries. At present, the field at home is practically boundless. To illustrate: Let us plant out 250,000 acres and we produce hardly enough to supply two manufactories, the Suffolk Cordage Company, of Chelsea, Mass., and the immense Agricultural Implement Works of Wm. Deering, Chicago, Ill.

An opportunity now presents itself to take advantage of these vast possibilities, to the certain advancement of our own interests and the development of our State. We have organized the Florida Fiber Company, have purchased 1,310 acres of land, boats and tools, erected houses, set out a large acreage, and leased a Key containing a sufficient number of small plants to set out our entire tract. Our plantation is all high and dry, of the rocky character of Yucatan lands, with a river front of over two miles, and six feet of water on the New River Bar. However, with our present means, we are able to work a comparatively small force which, unless a good portion of our treasury stock is sold, will not enable us to fully accomplish our purpose, i.e., to have 1,000 acres growing within a year, in order that we may put up machinery and commence cutting within three years.

The farm had been in operation for about a year when J. E. Ingraham, soon to be Henry Flagler’s general agent, visited the farm while on a boating expedition in April 1892. His secretary made this entry for the 13th of that month:

C. The weather still being somewhat unsettled and a somewhat heavy wind blowing from the east, our boatman decided it was not prudent to attempt the ocean trip until change of wind. We sailed back to the house of refuge and made a call on the keeper, Mr. Denis O’Neil, who gave us a cordial welcome and invitation to the hospitalities of the place. While there, we met Mr. C. G. Phillips, a young man at present in charge of the property of the Florida Fibre Company of Jacksonville on Middle River, whose invitation to visit the Company’s farm we accepted. It is about 2 miles northwest of the station on west bank of Middle River, which near the station forks from New River in the direction named. The Florida Fibre
Company owns about 2 miles north, south of the Middle River, have 7 acres set out in Sisal hemp with perhaps an acre in nursery of same plant. Their buildings consist of two small houses of one room each; frame buildings but unfinished inside. The oldest plants have been out since last summer, only. The land is high pine, sloping to a saw grass prairie on the east and bordering the river. The plants nearest this prairie look the most vigorous. The pine land had but little rock visible or near the surface and looked quite poor. The timber was fair, but saw logs scattering. Mr. Phillips told us that fertilization was said to make the plants grow faster and make longer leaves, but that it injured the quality of the fibre; that poor land a slow growth was best in results. Compte grows profusely all over the pineland we crossed.

One week later, the Florida Fiber Company’s farm made some news in the Juno Tropical Sun:

D. United States Department of Agriculture agent Charles Dodge carried a stripping machine with him to New River and extracted the fiber from three tons of leaves. The process is a simple one. The leaves are cut lengthwise by numerous blades and the pulp washed from the fibre. The article is then dried and is soft, silky and ready for shipment.

Fiber is easy to cultivate and any land, almost, below the frost line is adapted to it.

Company is full of vim and vigor. Company composed almost entirely of Jacksonville gentlemen. Has a boat in connection with its farm and proposed later to buy machinery for separating the fiber from the pulp. It has plenty of push and believes firmly in the future greatness of the industry.

Despite the positive press and the investment of many thousands of dollars, the hemp industry never got started in south Florida. Perhaps the first sign of financial troubles appeared as early as December 1891, when Fletcher petitioned the Dade County Commissioners for tax relief for his trouble-plagued firm.

E. Your petitioner, the Florida Fiber Company, respectfully asks for a reduction of its taxes for the year 1891, and in doing so would state that we are spending money and a great deal of work and time in establishing the industry of growing sisal hemp and extracting the fiber therefrom in your County thereby attracting settlers, opening up the County [sic] between Lake Worth and Miami, advertising the County and in every way drawing attention to your climate, your soil, and your advantages. We are not adventurers or speculators but we are pushing an industry which is receiving attention in this Country and in Europe and we mean to demonstrate the fact that your County furnishes the requisite conditions for the development of an enterprise which will result in great benefits to it.
and the whole State. Under these circumstances we feel we can apply to your board to reduce the taxes assessed against us for 1891 from $32.41 down to some nominal figure. We are all Florida people, our capital is Florida capital, our employees [sic] and all our officers are home people. We believe we are doing an important work for the State and especially for Dade County, at the same time we hope in the course of time to obtain a reasonable return. It will be at least five years before we can expect any dividend on our stock and in the meantime we shall continually be putting our money in. We ask for your encouragement and we go into these details confident that upon explanation of our enterprise and of our undertaking and of our efforts you will grant our request.

Though the exact fate of this enterprise remains a small mystery, this much is known: in June 1894 the Jacksonville Times-Union reported that the company had "laid off lands into town lots" and had sold many of them to settlers. Correspondence between Fletcher and P. A. Cunningham, a Jacksonville attorney, in 1895 indicates that frost might have precipitated the failure of hemp crop and the eventual bankruptcy of the Florida Fiber Company, marking the end of the first great attempt to reap riches from the fertile banks of the New and Middle Rivers.

NOTES

A. Prospectus for the Florida Fiber Company, 1890, pages 2-3; Historical Association of Southern Florida.

B. Advertising circular for Florida Fiber Company, 1890 [?], page 2; Historical Association of Southern Florida.


D. Article, Juno Tropical Sun, 21 April, 1892, from Broward County Historical Commission.

E. Petition to Dade County Board of Commissioners, 11 December 1891, Historical Association of Southern Florida.