Some Fallacies Concerning Florida

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Incorrect assumptions, perceptions and ideas often become so intertwined with actual situations that through time the truth seems less factual than the folklore. Florida, being inaccessible until almost the 20th century, fostered many perceptions and ideas that were later proved incorrect. Even until recently geological and popular historical literature contained several fallacies that still find their way into present-day literature and conversation. Four of these fallacies are examined here (Fig. 1, cover).

Florida—A Coral Formation

One of the more interesting of the fallacies relates to the area of the state underlain by coral rock. A survey made along the Florida Reef in 1846 by Timothy Abbott Conrad, and later by Louis Agassiz, gave some grounds for the belief that the entire peninsula of Florida was a coral formation. Agassiz, the eminent Swiss naturalist, reported that Florida had been extended southward from a line represented by the parallel of 28° N by the growth of a succession of coral reefs across a sea bottom not deeper than twelve to twenty fathoms and by the burial of the reefs beneath an accumulation of detritus cast up by the sea to heights a few feet above sea level. The growth of the reefs and the accumulation of the detritus was completed without change in the relative level of the sea and the Floridan Platform. He further supposed that Florida could not grow beyond the present living reef, for the water was too deep for coral to take hold and grow. This theory was incorporated by Joseph Le Conte in his textbook, Elements of Geology, in 1878, and was generally accepted for many years. Little was known about the interior of Florida when this theory was formulated, and facts since discovered have shown it to be false. Actually it was Angelo Heilprin in 1886 who determined that the progressive growth of the peninsula as far south as Lake Okeechobee was due to a combination of sedimentation and upheaval.

Florida's Highest Point

A long held belief concerning the location of the highest point in Florida may have been a result of wishful thinking. Because Florida is, for all practical purposes extremely low and flat, the high ridge, averaging 150 feet above sea level, that runs through the center of the state is called the Central Highlands. This highland area extending from the Georgia state line in the north to the vicinity of Glades County, a distance of approximately 250 miles, appears to be the logical place for the highest point in Florida. In fact, in The Scenery of Florida, Geological Bulletin No. 17, Cooke, (1939), stated that the Lake Region, the southern part of the Central Highlands, rose higher than anywhere else in Florida. He therefore placed the highest point at Iron Mountain (325 feet above sea level) near Lake Wales, Polk County. Interestingly, on the summit of this "mountain" stands the attractive carillon called the Bok Singing Tower, perhaps helping to perpetuate this fallacy. It is interesting to note that not only was Iron Mountain not the correct location neither was the elevation 325 feet. The 325 feet was recorded by a private survey and actually the elevation is between 290-300 feet above sea level.
Even as late as 1964 The Florida Handbook (Morris, 1964), included in the inside cover a reference to Brooksville in Hernando County as being the highest point in Florida. Fortunately Morris contradicts this statement on a later page correctly placing the highest elevation in Walton County at 345 feet just south of the town of Lakewood.

Florida--Land of 30,000 Lakes

Perhaps because lakes are a very visible part of the scenery of Florida it does seem as though Florida has at least 30,000 lakes. Part of this perception may be a result of the landscape of Florida, particularly in the Lake Region, where there are numerous solution basins. Many of them stand above the water table and are quite dry. Some protrude below the water table and are more or less permanent lakes. During the wettest seasons of the year, these depressions contain water, but during times of drought when the water table drops they are transformed into grassy ponds, and sometimes become completely dry.

In 1969, the Florida Board of Conservation under the direction of Randolph Hodges published the Gazetteer of Florida's Lakes (Florida Board of Conservation, 1969). This gazetteer lists alphabetically and by principal river basins all of the fresh-water lakes in Florida named on the topographic sheets of the U.S. Geological Survey and unnamed lakes which were at least 10 acres or more in size. There are 7,712 lakes listed and their sizes ranged from one acre to almost one-half million acres. Lake Okeechobee is the largest of the 7,712 lakes and the largest fresh-water lake in the United States that is located entirely within one state--738 square miles.

The Unique St. Johns River

The St. Johns River has long been described as the only navigable river wholly within the United States that flows north. For many years it was assumed that this statement is true, especially when John M. Mullen included it in his Facts to Know, Florida, (Mullen, 1938). The truth is that this "fact" is yet another fallacy concerning Florida that many people still believe. There are a number of rivers in the United States that flow north, among them the Tennessee, Red and Yellowstone.

The unique aspect of the St. Johns River is that it flows northward for nearly 200 miles entirely within one state, and that its headwaters lie less than 20 feet above sea level. No other river in the United States can equal those two features. The northward flowing characteristic also led some people to believe that it also must be flowing uphill. This fallacy probably originated in the colloquial language of many Americans who have the misconception that up is north and down is south, when geographically up is away from, and down is toward the center of the earth.

Ideas and assumptions can be incorrect, even though many people believe them. This is especially true concerning these four mistaken ideas about different physical features of Florida. The facts are now known and it is time that the literature and conversations concerning Florida reflect the true situation.
References


The F. S. G. congratulates Edward Fernald, Florida’s State Geographer

Edward A. Fernald, Ph.D.
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Dear Dr. Fernald:

It gives me great pleasure to designate you as State Geographer for the Florida Department of State.

As State Geographer you will serve as my principle advisor on matters dealing with State geography, including but not limited to the geographic characteristics of state lands; advocacy for geographic studies in public schools; and custodian of place and natural feature names and spatial relationships.

The accomplishments of you and your Institute are a credit to the State of Florida and the Florida State University. I look forward to a long and prosperous cooperative relationship between our offices in this very important area of State responsibility.

Sincerely,

George Firestone
Secretary of State

cc: Bernard F. Sliger, Ph.D.