When a territory has been occupied by a succession of societies with strong institutions geared to the achievement of explicit geographical goals, our expectation is that relics of past imprints would be obvious in the landscape palimpsest. Most usually in such circumstances, the application of the current set of objectives and their mapping onto the land are modified by past usage and structure. Thus, the lines and villages of the manorial system guide the fields and farms of lowland Britain's commercial agriculture, while the plans of Puritan oligarchies laid out the landscape now occupied by commercial horticulture and dairying in New England.

The most marked institutional influence on the pattern of American human geography is postulated to be the Northwest Ordinance and the rectangular land system it inaugurated. The system was designed for the interior lowlands and it erased the light hand of Indian occupancy there fairly thoroughly. West Florida was the first area where this system was imposed displacing significant European colonial occupation. Here, then, we might expect to see concrete remnants of a lengthy colonial heritage showing through, as for example in California. West Florida was invested twice by Spanish and once by British imperial control (Fig.1, cover). Imperial land allocation policies with overt political aims were in operation in the area for considerable periods. These have, however, left little signature on the land. The incorporation of this area in the USA successfully eradicated the vestiges of previous occupation, heralding the triumph of the competitive society and "manifest destiny" and their precursor in the Ordinance of 1785.

The Political Succession

Spain 1688-1763

For more than a century after its discovery Spain's possession of the Gulf coast served the empire as a wilderness buffer zone, protecting New Spain from European percolation in North America. The military post of Pensacola was founded in 1689 to hold the coast for Spain but it failed to establish a firm foothold of settlement. While French posts along the Mississippi and as far east as Mobile Bay thrived, Pensacola was considered one of the least desirable postings in the empire. Conditions were often desperate, as in 1704 when British raids from the Carolina frontier destroyed the Franciscan Apalachee missions, eliminating the only local source of food. Spanish troops were forced to depend on the French of Mobile for sustenance. The Creeks resisted penetration beyond the shores of Pensacola Bay and Indian raids, incited by the British, inhibited agriculture. When the British occupied Pensacola, however, they attributed the "few paltry gardens" to "Spanish indolence."

The Spanish reciprocated this cultural animosity by leaving en masse when the 1763 Treaty of Paris transferred Florida to Britain, despite assurances that "the new Roman Catholic subjects may profess the worship of their religion . . . as far as the laws of Great Britain permit." Along with the Spaniards went the remnants of the Yamassee nation which had come to them seeking refuge from British slave raids. This exodus left the British with a deserted town and a paper claim to a territory in the real possession of powerful Indian nations.
The British government acquired Florida out of a combination of traditional mercantilist and new imperialist motives. The mercantilists perceived a mild climate similar to the valuable colonies of Carolina and Georgia and perhaps even far south enough to compare with the Indies. British energy would convert the savage land into plantations providing rice, indigo, cochineal, and sugar. Possession of Florida would also provide a monopoly on trade with the Chickasaw, Chocktaw and Creek nations, and its spacious harbors would provide a base from which to capture trade with Spanish America.

For imperial strategists, the treaty of 1763 provided Britain with undisputed control of Canada and all the land east of the Mississippi with the exception of the Isle of Orleans. Thus, a natural boundary served also as a transport route connecting settlements along the western frontier from the Gulf to Illinois country. West Florida was particularly important as it bounded the only frontier with the Spanish empire occupied by Europeans. In addition, the land of Florida could be used to relieve land hunger in the older Atlantic colonies and divert settlers away from conflict with the nations of the interior.

Bernardo de Galvez's reacquisition of the Floridas satisfied Spain's long-standing objective of an unbroken rim of possession around the Gulf. Combined under the Captaincy-General of Louisiana and West Florida, these two provinces provided Mexico's defense against the encroachment of individualistic frontiersmen loosely associated with a newly established republican government. In West Florida there was the complication that the population and settlement landscape were of British origin. This occasioned a radical departure from the principles of colonization followed for over 200 years in the "Recopilación de las Indias."

By the Treaty of San Lorenzo, 1795, West Florida suffered its first loss of territory to the United States. In 1791 de Galvez had conquered the entire British province whose northern boundary since 1764 had been the parallel of 32°28'N. In the treaty of 1783 Britain agreed that Spain would "retain" West Florida as a conquered province but, at the same time, ceded to the United States her claim to lands extending south to the 31st parallel. This cession to the United States, therefore, included much of the territory which Spain possessed by conquest. In the years which followed the United States and the State of Georgia disputed jurisdiction over this strip while Spain retained de facto control. The most fertile lands of the province were in the disputed territory. There, in the valleys of the Tensaw district north of Mobile Bay and along the Mississippi and its bayous in the west, a majority of the former British subjects had chosen to remain on their land. Writing to Galvez, Governor General Miró reported that many of the British from Mobile and Pensacola had migrated to the rich lands of the Natchez district. Even before Anglo-Americans were permitted to settle in West Florida officially, the population of the Natchez area consisted almost entirely of people who had settled in British West Florida before and during the American Revolution. Many of the plantation families who later controlled Mississippi were descended from settlers of the British period. The British settlements in clearings scattered amidst the forest were insulated from Spanish cultural influence and avoided Spanish efforts at assimilation.

With Napoleon's sale of Louisiana to the United States, an Anglo-American wedge replaced the keystone of Spain's arch over the Gulf. West Florida became an outlier not a bulwark. It was clear, to the governor of West Florida at least, that this was merely a first step as southern states clamored for access to the Gulf down West Florida's rivers.
The beginning of the nineteenth century found Baton Rouge the least secure of the province's districts. The Mobile and Baton Rouge districts were ceded from French Louisiana to Britain in 1763 and became part of British West Florida. The United States exploited an ambiguity in the Louisiana Purchase agreement to lay claim to these districts. With the relocation of the provincial government from New Orleans to Pensacola in 1803, Baton Rouge became the most remote district surrounded on three sides by the United States. The residents of this most populous section were 40% French, 40% Anglo-American and only 20% Spanish. In 1810 the United States fomented a rebellion in the district. In rapid succession the free and independent state of West Florida was proclaimed; it seceded from the Spanish province; annexation by the United States was requested and the area was admitted as the "Florida Parishes" of Louisiana. In 1813, the United States pressed its claim to the Mobile district with troops under Andrew Jackson. All that remained of West Florida was the land east of the Perdido River, encompassing the town of Pensacola and the military outpost of San Marcos. By the Adams-Onis treaty of 1819, both East and West Florida were sold in their entirety to the United States.

Colonial Land Policy and Practice

British West Florida

The first substantial settlement of the area took place as a latter-day and unique British colony west of the Appalachians. In designing the land policy for the colony, administrators were conscious of the need to populate it quickly. It was intended to distribute land only to permanent settlers and to attract small farmers who could not get land in older colonies. The governor was discouraged from offering large tracts and creating a class of absentee landlords rather than a permanent establishment of middle class owner-occupiers. The wilderness, Spain's protection in Florida for 160 years, was now Britain's enemy. The more quickly West Florida could emerge from its pioneer fringe of British settlement, the sooner its inhabitants would satisfy mercantilist demands for raw materials and become self-supporting, contented, loyal British subjects.

No sooner was the Treaty of Paris signed, and even before British troops landed, than speculators rushed to Pensacola to buy what improved land there was from evacuating Spaniards and Indians. The treaty guaranteed the right of the Spanish to sell their estates within a year and a half of the treaty's ratification, but all sales made before the arrival of occupying forces were eventually invalidated to ensure crown control of land distribution. In the early days the governor and council's attention was concentrated on the existing fabric in Mobile and Pensacola. Rural development progressed slowly spreading around the shores of the bay. Immigration was not encouraged by the unhealthy reputation which reports gave Pensacola as swampy and fever-ridden and Mobile as a "graveyard for Britons." The first years of development were given to draining swamps, building up Pensacola and Mobile and connecting them by road as trade centers with the Indian nations. As a western defense, a chain of forts was built from Natchez to Fort Bute along the Mississippi. As settlement around the initial foci consolidated, the emphasis shifted to more distant portions of the colony, especially to the Natchez country where towns were planned at Natchez, Menchac and Dartmouth at the confluence of the Iberville and Amit Rivers.

Despite the precautions taken to discourage large accumulations of land, speculation was rife in the colony. Officials acquired vast tracts under grants by mandamus, family right, purchase right, and collusion, as their wives petitioned and received grants. After the Spanish conquest the colony's surveyor general and one-time acting governor Elias Durnford lost 57,717 acres in eight lots. Officials encouraged speculation because obtaining title generated fees. Hundreds of thousands of acres reserved by promoters for colonization schemes actually succeeded only in removing vast stretches of the most
fertile land from the reach of sincere settlers. The situation became so serious that the London government forbade Governor Chester to make grants in 1773. This ban, however, was lifted as West Florida was declared a refuge for loyalists. The resulting wave of immigration encouraged further indiscriminate granting of large tracts as refugees were compensated for the price of their fidelity.

In practice politicians and administrators lost sight of the clear and explicit intent calculated to fit West Florida into the imperial scheme. After directing the British defense of Pensacola, General Cambell expressed his disgust with this loss of vision as follows: "What interpretation can the whole bear, but that it was considered no object of national concern, and left as a geegaw to amuse and divert the ambition of Spain and prevent it from attending to objects of greater moment and importance."\[14]\n
Spanish West Florida

The settlement policy which evolved after 1783 represented an unprecedented liberalization of Spain's colonial doctrine. This modification began in Louisiana with Governor O'Reilly's efforts to fend off Anglo-American advances by attracting non-Spanish, but nonetheless Catholic, immigrants. Displaced Acadians, Swiss and German Catholics were encouraged to settle in Louisiana. Land was granted free to each newly arrived family in proportion to the means of cultivators, with land reverting to the King if certain cultivation and enclosure requirements were not met.\[15]\ A plan of defense was based on a colonial militia and Frenchmen were appointed to colonial offices.

The collapse of British power permitted a flood of Americans to cross the Appalachians into the heart of the continent formerly reserved for the Indian nations. The government of the United States, through a secret treaty with Britain, claimed all of West Florida above the thirty-first parallel. Feeling the pressures mounting against the northern boundary, Miró sought to populate the frontier against the republican onslaught. British Protestants were granted permission to remain on their lands provided they swore allegiance to the King. The royal order assured the settlers they would not be disturbed in religious matters, though their children would be indoctrinated in Catholicism. English-speaking Irish priests were brought in to begin the first stage in a slow task of Hispanicizing the Anglos.\[16]\ Following the establishment in Natchez of a small colony of Maryland Catholics, Miró realized that Anglos would emigrate to West Florida at no expense whatsoever, attracted by free, fertile land. Amicable relations with the resident Anglos calmed fears of governing a province of aliens and heretics to such an extent that it seemed rational to swell the population with the very immigrants who were providing the United States with the excuse for territorial aggression. Miró came to believe that the Anglo-American tide could be harnessed under the paternal care of His Catholic Majesty with the benefits of free land and free commerce on the Mississippi.

Miró's successor, Baron de Carondelet, fearing the ambitions of the United States, banned Anglo-American settlement north of Pointe Coupée in the Baton Rouge district. He sought to strengthen Spain's position in the Mississippi valley by fortifying military posts and securing alliances with the Indian nations who were experiencing American expansion. His fears were well-founded and in 1795, Spain was induced to surrender her claim to West Florida north of the thirty-first parallel.

In 1797 Governor General Gayoso de Lemos issued a set of regulations governing the granting of lands in Louisiana and West Florida. Speculation was inhibited by an upper limit of 800 arpents (680 acres) on grants and the prohibition of title transfer before substantial improvements were made.
Immigrants were directed to settle contiguously in the interests of defense and political and social coherence. The intent was to create a population permanently attached to their land. These efforts to establish a human barricade between Mexico and the United States failed because the political turmoil of Napoleonic wars retarded European immigration; because the United States proved a more powerful magnet for immigrants; and because of the short time given Spanish officials to do much before the advance of the republic overcame them.

The Dismemberment Of West Florida

The three territorial acquisitions which brought West Florida into the possession of the United States were among the earliest extensions of its new national land policy. The factors which shaped that policy were quite independent of the conditions in British and Spanish West Florida. The objectives underlying the formation of the American land system were peculiar to the unprecedented republican politics of a nascent nation with a seemingly limitless supply of land. Though the West Florida territory played no part in this development, the subsequent application of the land settlement system devised, overwhelmed all prior influences in the region’s human landscape.

American land policy resulted from the compromise of two diametrically opposed goals. Jefferson was intent on colonizing the interior. Hamilton sought revenue to pay off the war debt and insure the survival of the new government, and the public domain was the obvious asset with which to resolve the nation’s financial problem. On the contrary, Jefferson projected the frontier attitude proclaiming that, “By selling land you will disgust them and cause an avulsion of them from the common union. They will settle the land in spite of everybody.” In this he identified the inertial force which could not be turned aside by laws. Accommodating the desire to “make the government secure and great through the spread of people over millions of acres of the great central valley” to the desperate need for revenue, the Congress produced the Ordinance of 1785. This provided the legal framework for the evolution of the Gulf Coast landscape which obliterated colonial West Florida.

Not only the township system of rectangular surveys, to which all prior claims had to be reconciled and which shaped the allotment of the public domain, but also the piecemeal acquisition of the territory by the United States served to bury the traditions of the colony. The pieces were variously distributed between Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama and Florida. After dispersal of over two thirds of West Florida to three other states, the remainder was occupied and merged with the former colony of East Florida. Application of the national land policy to that combined Florida territory retarded the growth of the established colonial settlements and opened the previously unsettled lands of Middle Florida to a burgeoning immigration which soon surpassed the older settlements in both population and political power, eclipsing the colonial identity.

The Georgia Cession 1802

The United States claimed the strip of land lying north of the 31st parallel on the grounds that the treaty of 1785 with Great Britain named the older boundary of West Florida at 31°N as the southern limit of her cession. This included the lush lands of the Natchez and Tombigbee districts. Spain relinquished her claim in 1795 by the Treaty of San Lorenzo but remained in possession for three more years as the States of Georgia and South Carolina disputed ownership of the acquisition. In 1802 Georgia finally ceded her colonially derived western lands to the federal government, and the Mississippi Territory, as it had been dubbed, became part of the public domain. This cession required the United States to accept the burden of adjudicating a
morass of land claims made under British, Spanish and Georgian jurisdiction. As late as 1844 the Supreme Court was still sorting the mess out.18

The Louisiana Purchase 1803

Basing a claim upon the wording of Spain’s retrocession of Louisiana to France by the Treaty of San Ildefonso, the United States insisted that their purchase included all the land north of the Iberville and east of the Mississippi as far as the Perdido, a region which had been called West Florida since 1763 when the British acquired it from the French. France had never re-occupied the territory and Spain refused to relinquish it in 1803. In 1810 the area from the Mississippi to the Pearl River was wrested from her as the "Independent State of West Florida" and added to Louisiana in 1812.

In 1813 the United States occupied all of the province lying west of the Perdido. This was annexed to the Mississippi Territory. In 1817 this was divided between the state of Mississippi and the territory of Alabama, thus connecting Mobile with its hinterland in the Tensaw-Tombigbee basin.

Spain’s retention of the land and granting of claims subsequent to 1803 presented particular problems of incorporation into the United States land system. The tangle was finally settled in favor of accepting the grants of the de facto government by an Act of Congress passed in 1860, amended in 1867 and extended in 1872.19

The Florida Treaty 1819

The remaining portion of West Florida, from Pensacola two hundred miles east to the fort of San Marcos (St. Marks), was obtained along with East Florida (Fig. 2). The land east of the Perdido and south of 31°N was acquired

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Fig. 2. Florida Territory 1822-1845
with recognition of the full prior sovereignty of Spain. This last part of West Florida to enter the public domain thus experienced a smoother transition. A board of commissioners was appointed in 1822 to deal with existing claims and finished its work by 1826. The only exception was Colin Mitchel's claim to over 1,250,000 acres. This stemmed from an Indian cession made to the trading firm of Panton Leslie and Company in recompense for tribal debts. This firm had served the colonial government by managing Indian affairs and the claim had been condoned by the Spanish administration. The area included the port of Apalachicola and a Supreme Court decision in favor of the appellant scared the inhabitants into shifting their activities onto the undisputed public domain, founding the community of St. Joseph.

The Surveyor General, Robert Butler, began subdividing the public domain in the near wilderness region which had been practically devoid of European settlement since the Franciscans were driven out. West Florida's identity on the political map vanished when East and West Florida were merged into the Florida Territory in 1822. Nevertheless the tradition of two separate provinces remained a strong force in politics throughout the territorial period. While confirmation of prior claims held up occupation of previously settled areas, the opening of the West Florida public lands between the Suwannee and Apalachicola gave rise to a third region, Middle Florida, whose geographic and economic distinction was recognized by its 1829 designation as a separate judicial district. The area, with Tallahassee as its focus, attracted many settlers when Florida's first public land sale made it available in the Spring of 1826. "It was soon apparent that Middle Florida was to be the center of the Territory in every sense -- economic, social, and political as well as geographical -- the East and West, while retaining some of their mutual distrust, promptly transferred most of their jealousy to Middle Florida." In a poll in May of 1837, residents of Seminole War-torn East Florida and agriculturally poor West Florida joined in opposition against the majority vote from Middle Florida which advocated Florida's admission to the Union as one unified Territory. The cause for territorial division was fervently argued both within the state and before Congress. Whereas Middle Florida favored entrance into the Union as one state, both the conservative colonial settlements of Pensacola and St. Augustine upheld their tradition of separation.

Sentiment in Pensacola strongly favored a proposal made by the Alabama legislature to politically reunite the geographically and economically tied settlements of Alabama and West Florida. According to Bailey, even before the Alabama territory came into being the inhabitants of the area north of West Florida coveted the land which lies west of the Apalachicola River. As early as 1811, two hundred sixty-three residents of the Mississippi Territory petitioned the Congress of the United States to add West Florida to their jurisdiction. Not only would this give the Mississippi territory sufficient population for admission to statehood, they asserted, but it would promote the interests of the people of both sections.

Political union of the Floridas became an object of national concern as the territory considered applying for statehood. Middle Florida's desire to enter the Union was augmented by national pressures since a southern, slaveholding territory was sought to balance the admission of Iowa, a northern territory, into the Union. Although Florida retained the right of division (and many believed the Florida Treaty actually required such), the population at that critical period was not sufficient for admission to statehood if any such territorial division were achieved. Furthermore if Florida did not enter the Union paired with Iowa, it was feared that the opportunity for statehood would be delayed for many years. Therefore pressure from the populous and politically powerful Middle Florida combined with external persuasion to further the union of the Floridas in preparation for admission into the Union.
The struggle against West Florida's political union with East Florida continued even after Florida was granted statehood in 1845, for the annexation issue was renewed in the 1850's and again during the reconstruction period following the War Between the States when Alabama's attempted annexation of Florida territory west of the Apalachicola River was nearly realized.

The theme of the chief negotiator's address was that cession of West Florida to Alabama would be mutually advantageous. He pointed out that the geometrical outlines of both states would be improved and that the homogeneity of the peoples of each would be increased. His trump card was the argument that annexation would facilitate the prosperity of West Florida. Once the cession had taken place, he envisioned the coal and iron of central Alabama finding its world outlet through the port of Pensacola which would become one of the world's great cities.26

The terms of cession were agreed upon by both states with Alabama offering to pay $1,000,000 in exchange for the territory. Though a referendum in West Florida proved a majority of the population favored annexation the movement was eventually defeated. In 1874, Alabama abandoned the attempt, and likewise the tradition of separate Floridas was forgotten.

The Outcome

It appears that in the last resort what was important was the demand for cotton of industrial England and New England, which created Middle Florida and overwhelmed the political significance of West Florida. In historical terms, the traces of centuries were wiped away in short order. West Florida's piecemeal incorporation into the United States, the settlement of prior claims, and especially, the national land system dismembered the colony and expunged the traces of imperial objectives and efforts from the landscape. The vestiges are only to be seen in place and motel names, a few empty bottles, clay pipes, buttons, and wall foundations housed in museums, and signs set up by the Beauregardus chapter of the Colonial Dames celebrating events strangely out of keeping with the current state of their setting. The streets of Pensacola do reflect Spanish design and lines of trees show up on air-photos, following colonial boundaries cutting across the square fields of today. There are some road alignments coincident with their colonial originals.27 In general, however, little remains in the organization of the land to tell of the imperial past.

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4. *Journal of the Assembly of West Florida, November 10, 1766. West Florida Papers (miscellaneous documents)*


18. Ibid, p. 5.


23. Dorothy Dodd, Florida Becomes a State (Tallahassee, 1945), p. 36.


