

The St. Johns River Valley

Depopulated, Deforested; Repopulated, Reforested - Developed

By Thomas T. Ankersen

The St. Johns is Florida's first river. A northward flowing chain of lakes, the three hundred and ten mile long river resembles a well fed snake, bulging with nature's liquid largesse. It's aboriginal name is *Welaka* - River of Lakes. It rises in virtual anonymity, in the saw grass swamps of East Central Florida, a region some have called the "Little Everglades." By the time it reaches the sea along Florida's self proclaimed "First Coast," it is a broad working river girdled by the gleaming glass, steel and concrete of urban Jacksonville. The River facilitated first colonial - then pioneer - penetration into what poet Sidney Lanier described as the vast "liquid heart of Florida," decimating the indigenous population and opening the state to development that would soon leapfrog South, leaving the River something of a frontier backwater until the middle of the 20th century.

The St. Johns is less a river than a relict lagoon, formed by the shifting sands of climate change. It is, noted famed Florida naturalist Archie Carr, "like no other river in America." Where the brackish Indian River Lagoon now sits, fast to Florida's barrier beaches, the St. Johns itself once sat. Even today tidewater reaches far up the St. Johns, as far as Lake Monroe, more than a hundred and fifty miles from the River's mouth. This unique feature of the St. Johns harbors a strange amalgamation of salt and freshwater cohabitants. In aptly named Salt Springs, a relict lens of saltwater trapped deep in the sedimentary strata bubbles to the surface through porous limestone, sustaining a population of salt water ichthyofauna trapped by the forces of nature, some speculate, since the River's brackish lagoonal epoch. Springs remain a dominant feature of the St. Johns landscape, contributing nearly a third of its total flow, nourishing the River as they have nourished generations of human and animal inhabitants with crystalline water at a constant temperature of seventy two degrees.

Archaeologists speculate that the first humans to appear around the St. Johns were nomadic mammoth and mastodon hunters from a climatological period when much of Florida resembled the African savannah. The artesian springs and sinkholes of the St. John's may have been the region's only watering holes. As sea level began to rise after the last glacial recession, the character of the river valley changed markedly, resembling less a savannah than the broad flooded plain of the present. This change coincided with emergence of human sedentism in the basin, evidenced by large refuse mounds of freshwater snail shells along the banks of the river and it's tributaries. Environmentally induced change had slowed sufficiently to begin in earnest the River's human history. Human nature changed too, as indigenous inhabitants of the Southeast began to distinguish themselves from one another, forming discrete associations, one of which archaeologists describe as the "St Johns Tradition." The St. Johns tradition became the Timucuan, whom we know as the indigenous inhabitants who first greeted the Europeans upon their arrival in Northeast Florida. These Timucuan represent one manifestation of the Mississippian Culture, the name given to the relatively advanced, socially complex, agrarian societies of the Southeastern United States. It was also the stage at which North American

indigenous human development was arrested by the arrival of the Europeans. Some of the most compelling glimpses left into the Mississippian Culture are those provided by reproductions of the famous Timucuan etchings of Frenchman Jacques Le Moyne. Part art, part historical record, the beautifully rendered Le Moyne drawings provide a remarkable image of precolombian village life in North Florida.

Nature provided one of the greatest obstacles to European incursions into the St. Johns Basin, which began with the arrival of the French. A treacherous bar at the River mouth made *conquistadores* wary of the inland passage. Legendary Spanish explorer Ponce de Leon, the putative discoverer of *La Florida*, passed up the river in his mythic quest for the famous Fountain of Youth, reputed to be a spring spewing healing waters. But European history in the Basin was shaped by a world view that saw Florida as little more than safe harbor along the gold route, provisioning and protecting. Settlement occurred for the purpose of saving souls and supplying the trade route. Among the most cherished supplies was the timber from the centuries old Live Oaks which draped the River's banks, their thick elegantly curved bows coveted in shipbuilding. By end of the Colonial era, these had become so rare that the fledgling US government reserved all that remained for the federal government.

In little more than a generation after the arrival of the Europeans, the St. Johns Basin was largely depopulated, its original indigenous inhabitants decimated by disease and dogma. European inhabitants remained thinly spread along the coast and the riverbank. The St. Johns became a strategic pawn in the European chess match for America, controlled in a span of two centuries briefly by the French, then the Spanish, then the British, and then the Spanish again, before the fledgling United States assumed responsibility, if not control. Northeast Florida environmental historian and Archaeologist James J. Miller paints a post-colonial apocalyptic picture of a region in ruins, the forests slowly reclaiming colonial missions and settlements. Even when the Americans arrived, control was tenuous at best, for Creek Indians from the North had filled the void left by their indigenous brethren and terrorized the frontier landscape. Even so, the seeds had already been sown for the industries that would inexorably change the nature of the St. Johns River - timber and tourism.

The Civil War slowed growth in the region, as the St. Johns became a hostile borderland between the North which controlled the coastal shipping lanes and the South which controlled the interior. In the post-War pioneer era, however, the steamship opened the River to more regular traffic and the St. Johns came to be seen as a gateway, though the bar at the River's mouth continued to hinder the River's role in commerce. Nonetheless, the late nineteenth century ushered in the River's golden age of tourism. Northern tourists ventured up the River and its principle arteries in specially designed steamboats in search of tropical adventure. Among the notable chroniclers and tourists of St. Johns adventures were Harriet Beecher Stowe, Sidney Lanier and Ulysses S. Grant. Stowe captured 19th century nature and culture along the St. Johns in her collection of essays titled *Palmetto Leaves*. Alligator hunting became grand sport, so popular that the reptiles, whose ubiquity had amazed eighteenth century naturalist William Bartram, were soon all but lost from the St. John's landscape. Next in line to be lost were the Basin's vast virgin pine forest, and the old growth stands of cypress that once dominated it's swampy interior.

Timber remained a local commodity around the St. Johns until technology caught up with human

desire to exploit it. By the end of the century the Americans had developed the capacity to dredge and stabilize the shallow bar that had for so long guarded the River entrance and frustrated colonial and mercantile interests. Once the River was opened to ocean going traffic, the timber came out with remarkable speed, changing the region's ecology in a way that had not occurred in the previous fifteen thousand plus years of human habitation. According to Miller, by 1932 the entire basin had been stripped of its original old growth. In its place secondary forests on short rotations supply the contemporary wood pulp industry for paper products. Huge paper mills rose on the banks of the St. Johns and its tributaries providing market access and a source for the liquid waste stream. The chemical processes in pulp production produce a sickly sweet stench which a Jacksonville mayor famously described as "the smell of money." To the South, on Lake Monroe in the River's middle basin, the city of Sanford, had developed into a major shipping port for the burgeoning citrus industry. For most, Sanford remained the last port on the River.

While the lower St. Johns River began to develop some of the trappings of an urban waterway, the upper basin languished in peaceful anonymity well into the twentieth century. That too would change. The swampy environs that characterize the River's headwaters were ditched and drained to create huge cattle and citrus farms. The upper St. Johns was included in the Everglades drainage debacle known as the Central and Southern Florida Flood Control Project, suggesting that the River's headwaters are more closely linked to South Florida's development processes than to the River's distant northern reaches. Indeed, the River's headwaters, somewhere to the south of Blue Cypress Lake are little more than thirty miles from Okeechobee. Somewhere between those two points, a scarcely perceptible hydrologic divide sends water on two separate journeys, south and north.

Like most human dominated ecological systems in the United States, the post-modern history of the St. Johns Basin is one of restoration. In the headwaters, Florida's "Little Everglades," a half century of drainage has been reversed, out of the limelight of the massive restoration underway in the true Glades, its heroes lacking the name recognition of its southern counterparts. In the uppermost reaches of its largest tributary, the Oklawaha River, water managers seek to restore Lake Apopka, a national disgrace distinguishable from space by the color of its pollution. Despite broad public support, the intransigent forces of Florida's good old boy politics hold back the Oklawaha behind an infamous dam that has halted the peregrinations of manatees and fish to enjoy a "jubilee," as naturalist Carr described the migratory end game, in ancestral spring waters.

In the St. Johns urban reaches, the smell of money has changed as a later mayor of Jacksonville boldly donned water skis to herald the River's comeback. As the new century dawned the Clinton Administration declared the St Johns an "American Heritage River," one of only 14 across the nation, and a tribute to its unique status among the Nation's waterways. The ancestral spirits of the first Floridians now look on from the newly created Timucuan Ecological and Historic Preserve as government and non-profit interest groups seek to preserve some semblance of the River's natural and cultural history - for the Timucuan too little too late. The St. Johns even has a self appointed "keeper," joining such urban waterways as the Hudson (New York) and the Chatahoochee (Atlanta) in employing the coalition of environmental watchdogs known as "Riverkeepers." Even so, it seems unlikely that the St. Johns will ever reach a point where it can again serve as a refugia for one of its most notable, and environmentally sensitive, species, the anadromous and seemingly prehistoric Atlantic Short Nosed Sturgeon. Unless of course, the

Basin is once again depopulated in the course of human history.