# Coming Of Age

## Foundations Of Modern Florida: 1880-1900

By Gary Mormino

Standing on a Florida time plane after the Civil War and looking forward, one risks a serious case of future shock. Revolutions in transportation and communications, and profound changes in the ways and places Floridians lived were about to transform the state completely. But these changes had not yet occurred and Florida was, in many respects, still behind the times.

In the years directly following the Civil War, historians considered Florida to be backward, underdeveloped, and underpopulated. In 1880, its land mass approached 60,000 square miles, but its population of 269,493 ranked 34th out of 37 states. Vast stretches of the state resisted settlement, and Florida's population density (4.9 persons per square mile) lagged well behind the national average (16.9) and that of the south Atlantic region (28.3). Florida stood alone among states east of the Mississippi with fewer than 21 inhabitants per square mile.

Such sparse population contributed to the fact that Florida's fertility was relatively unknown to American consumers before the 1880s. But it was quickly becoming obvious that the transportation revolution held magical promise for Florida farmers and grove owners once isolated from distant markets and trade centers. Improved transportation, along with new agricultural settlements and aggressive marketing, were making Florida oranges, strawberries, and winter tomatoes more and more commonplace in New York and Philadelphia stalls.

### Golden Opportunity

The history of Florida agriculture in the late 19th century is actually a story of creating and filling desires. Capitalizing on America's changing tastes and greater demand for fresh fruits and vegetables, Florida (and in turn, California) helped create and popularize new markets. Orange crate labels made Florida citrus especially fashionable (see page 28).

> "Florida was widely touted as a poor farmer's paradise. On acreage considered laughable in the West, agriculturalists in Florida carefully tended small truck farms and groves. In 1880, Florida boasted 23,000 farms."

If cotton was king of the Old South and pineapple emblematic of the lush Caribbean, the orange became the enduring symbol of Florida. The *Jacksonville Press* stated in 1876 that "with the orange successfully cultivated in every county, and all the carpetbaggers, with their abundant ills banished, Florida will certainly be the garden of the continent."

The orange tree indeed incorporated the heritage and bloodline of the Florida Dream. But to most Americans in the mid-19th century, the orange had been more or less unobtainable. As modes of transportation improved, however, oranges quickly became a popular commodity.

Several Union officers, bewitched by the lure of St. Augustine winters, had returned to Florida and purchased


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grove properties after the war. Suddenly steamboats were carrying boxes of perishable fruit from Lake Dora to Jacksonville to Savannah. Efficient locomotives were rushing the winter fruit from the "Golden Triangle" (Mount Dora, Eustis, and Tavares) to Chicago. Most Americans probably tasted their first orange during the holiday season, when a stocking stuffed with a bright orange became a common tradition.

Florida was widely touted as a poor farmer's paradise. On acreage considered laughable in the West, agriculturalists in Florida carefully tended small truck farms and groves. In 1880, Florida boasted 23,000 farms. A well-manicured, 10-acre orange grove in Florida delivered the promise of the

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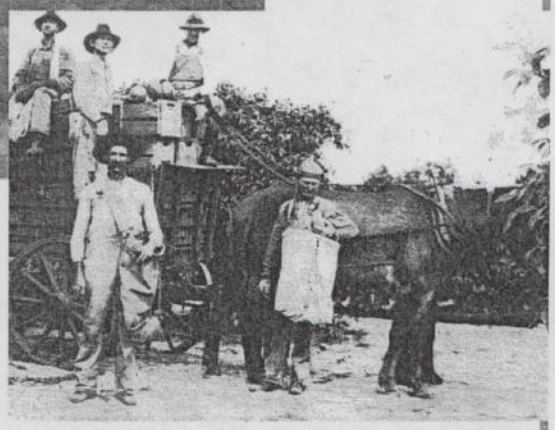

Photo courtesy of the Florida State Archives Photographic Collection

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## Citrus Heroes

### General Henry Sheldo
# Sanford

### Broadening Florida's Citrus Horizons

What do Valencia, Ruby Blood, Sanford Blood, St. Michael Blood, Mediterranean Sweet, Jaffa, Maltese Oval, and Majorca oranges have in common? They were all intr duced into Florida by General Henry Sheldon Sanford. The general also introduced Floridians to lemon varieties, including th Villafranca.

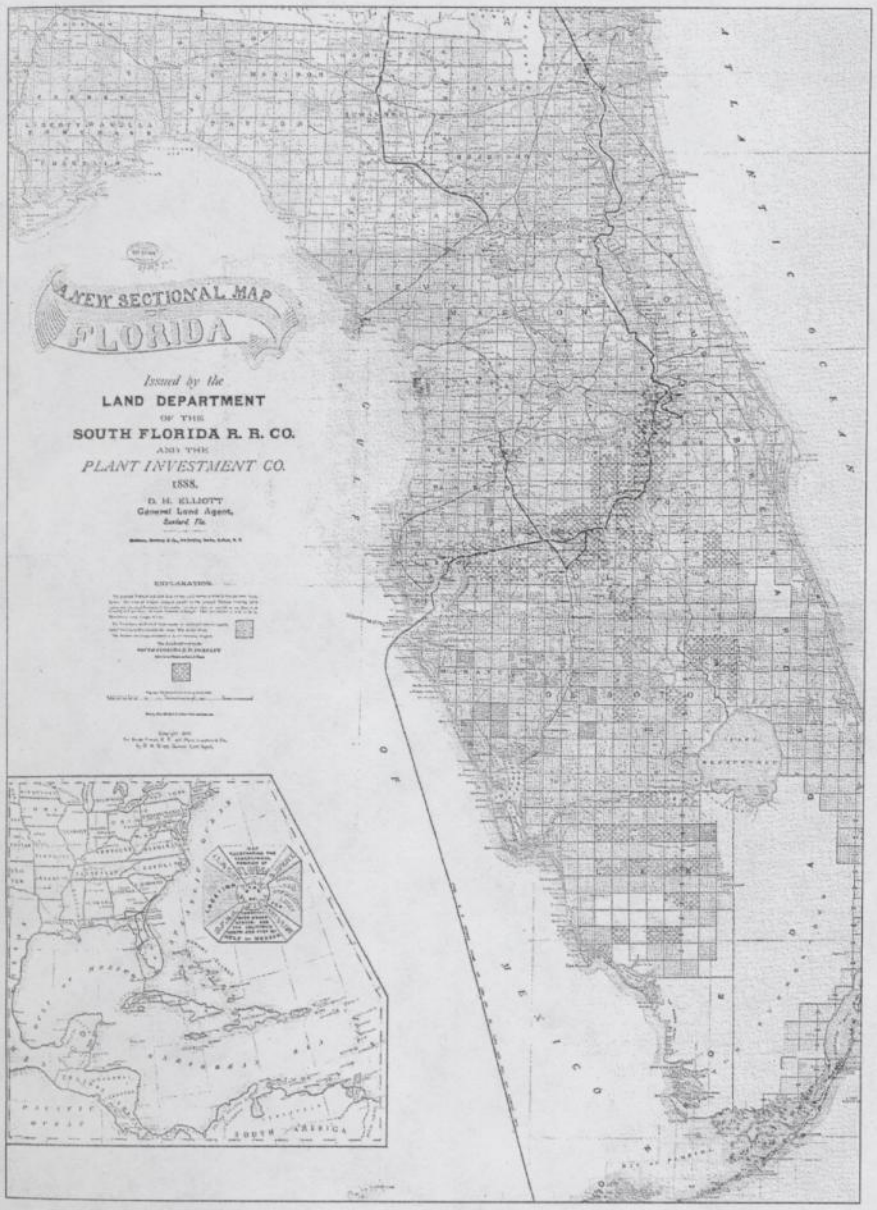
Valencia Oranges

By 1865, Gener Henry Sanford — the epitome of the aristocratic land baron — had already compresse several lives into one: wealth and renaissance interest had allowed Sanford to explore talents as a linguist, lawyer, botanist, diplomat, and soldier.

**Postwar Dream**

After touring the postwar South, The Civil War hero poured money and vision into an ambitious plan o Florida's Lake Monroe, purchasing 12,535 acres along the undevelopec lake. Sanford settled on the south shore of Lake Monroe in Mellonville named for Ft. Melon, around 1870. Later, the town was renamed Sanfor After purchasing the land, the one-time ambassador to Belgium established an office in London to interes Europeans in settling in Florida.

Of the many citrus varieties Gene al Sanford is credited with introducing, only a few are still grown in Florida. He brought the most important variety, the Valencia, from the Thomas River's Nursery in London, England, in 1870.




*This Florida development map, dated 1888 and now preserved in the Library of Congress, shows operating railways as solid black lines.*

Jeffersonian yeoman farmer, precisely at the moment when Western settlers were realizing that homesteads of 160 acres in Kansas and Nebraska were too small. Late 19th-century Florida, with its range of citrus groves and truck farms, was no agrarian myth. In Orange County, the typical grove was 5 acres or less. Transplanted farmers discovered that Florida sand and muck, with proper tending and timing, yielded intensive harvests, sometimes two crops a year. Moreover, Florida's vaunted climate promised rejuvenation to transplanted Yankee farmers, tired of Northern winters. An early booster stated, "The culture is well adapted to persons of small capital whose health requires a residence in Florida."

### The Orange Fever

An "orange fever" swept Florida in the 1870s and 1880s, and thousands of new settlers poured through Jacksonville. Pamphlets and books helped guide prospective grove owners and farmers, offering instructions on everything from steamboat routes to crop rotation. The Indian River served as a watery highway, bringing large numbers of settlers to homesteads in Volusia, Orange, and Brevard counties. In 1870, only 5134 inhabitants had resided in Volusia, Orange, and Brevard counties; by 1890, the collective populations had grown to 27,585 settlers. Quickly, Indian River citrus acquired a status as a premium fruit, as did oranges grown in Florida's Golden Triangle, Orange County, and other promoted locales. By the 1890s, growers in the Indian River area and other areas began to organize protective marketing associations.

Florida's citrus industry fluctuated wildly amid marketing barriers, unstable prices, and periodic freezes. In 1885, Florida produced 600,000 boxes of oranges; the following year a terrible freeze brought bankruptcies and gloom. By 1893, the growing popularity of oranges encouraged farmers to expand their groves. A record 4 million boxes of oranges marked the 1893-94 harvest. Orange, Putnam, Marion, Alachua, and Volusia counties alone accounted for 2 million boxes of citrus.

By the 1870s and 1880s, thousands of tourists and travelers also wintered in Jacksonville, prompting one visitor to observe that it was "really a Northern city in a Southern latitude." Jacksonville served as Florida's most important transportation hub for Northern visitors and prospective settlers. The center of a major steamboat network, Jacksonville allowed passengers to transfer from rail to steamer and journey into the interior of the state. Future farmers and urban dwellers utilized the St. Johns and Indian Rivers as highways, settling northeast and east-central Florida.

### Riding The Rails To Modern Times

In a dazzling and dizzying series of inventions and technological innovations, Florida entered the modern age during the decades of the 1880s and 1890s. Transportation revolutions helped bridge country and city, state and nation, nation and world. In 1880, Florida had languished in isolation, its Southern peninsula often lopped off maps. Only 500 miles of rail track had been laid; among Eastern and Southern states, only Mississippi and Delaware lagged behind Florida's rail total.