

THE MAGAZINE OF THE FLORIDA HUMANITIES COUNCIL

FORUM

FALL 2019

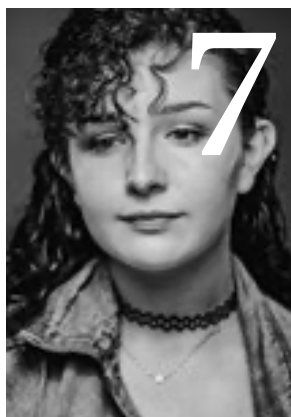
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WHAT DOES IT MEAN

TO BE A FLORIDIAN?

FINDING COMMON GROUND IN OUR DIVERSE, EVER-CHANGING STATE

PLUS: CELEBRATING OLD NAPLES • HARRIET BEECHER STOWE'S FLORIDA AWAKENING
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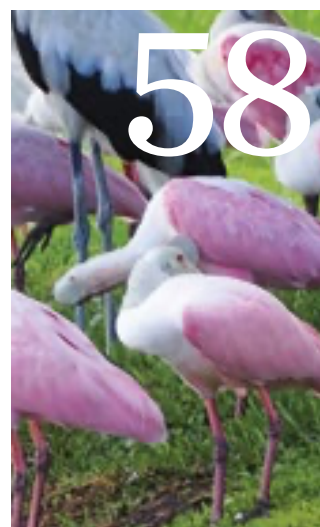
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Birds of a colorful feather

On one of her frequent visits to North Florida, this photographer hit the visual jackpot when she spotted a group of roseate spoonbills and a wood stork gathered near a bridge.

By Patty Previc Graham

FORUM Contributors

Dalia Colón, an Emmy Award-winning multimedia journalist, is a producer and co-host of *WEDU Arts Plus* on Tampa Bay's PBS station and produces *WUSF Public Media's* food podcast, *The Zest*. A native of Cleveland, Ohio, Colón was a staff reporter for *Cleveland Magazine* and the *Tampa Bay Times*. Her work has appeared in *The New York Times Magazine*, *Los Angeles Times*, *NPR*, and *Visit Florida*. She lives in Riverview with her husband, two young children, and cocker spaniel Max.



PHOTO BY BILLY SOMERVILLE

Peggy Macdonald is an adjunct professor of history at Stetson University and Indian River State College. She is the former director of the Matheson History Museum. A Gainesville native, Macdonald completed a doctorate in history at the University of Florida. She writes for *Gainesville Magazine*, *Our Town Magazine* and *Senior Times*, and serves on the Alachua County Historical Commission. She is the author of *Marjorie Harris Carr: Defender of Florida's Environment*.



PHOTO BY ANNIE MORIEN/RED HOT PEPPER STUDIOS

Gary Mormino is the Frank E. Duckwall professor of history emeritus at University of South Florida St. Petersburg, where he is also scholar in residence at the Florida Humanities Council.



Michele Currie Navakas grew up in Florida and is an associate professor of English at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, where she teaches early American literature, culture, and environment. Her book, *Liquid Landscape: Geography and Settlement at the Edge of Early America* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018), won the 2019 Rembert Patrick Award and the 2019 Stetson Kennedy Award from the Florida Historical Society. She is working on a cultural history of coral in early America. Parts of her essay, "Harriet Beecher Stowe's Florida," are excerpted with permission of the University of Pennsylvania Press from *Liquid Landscape: Geography and Settlement at the Edge of Early America*.



PHOTO BY EUGENE NAVAKAS

Betty Cortina-Weiss is a South Florida writer who believes salsa, the kind eaten and the kind you dance to, makes the world a better place. She specializes in food and lifestyle stories, and her work has appeared in *Saveur*, *People*, *O*, *The Oprah Magazine*, *Latina* and *Miami INDULGE*, where she was founding editor-in-chief for four years.



Ron Cunningham was a reporter at the *Fort Lauderdale Sun Sentinel*, higher education reporter at *The Gainesville Sun*, and Tallahassee bureau chief for *The New York Times Florida Newspapers*, before serving as editorial page editor at *The Gainesville Sun* until 2013. He is a University of Florida graduate and former editor-in-chief of the *Independent Florida Alligator*.



Bill DeYoung is the author of *Skyway: The True Story of Tampa Bay's Signature Bridge* and *The Man Who Brought It Down* and *Phil Gernhard, Record Man*. Nationally recognized for his music journalism, he has been a writer and editor at various Florida and Georgia newspapers for more than three decades.



Michael Lister is a *New York Times* bestselling and award-winning novelist known for his mystery series set in North Florida. A native Floridian, Lister grew up near the Gulf of Mexico and Apalachicola River in Weewahitchka, where he lives. He was the youngest chaplain within the Florida Department of Corrections, serving in the Panhandle, an experience that led to his first novel, *Power in the Blood*. Three of his novels have been adapted for the stage and one for the screen. His stories have appeared in various collections, including *Florida Heat Wave*, which he edited. Lister is the winner of two Florida Book Awards.



PHOTO BY LOUIS COLUMBUS

Jacki Lyden is an award-winning former NPR host and correspondent and the author of *Daughter of the Queen of Sheba*, which *The New York Times* called a "classic memoir." During her more than three decades with NPR, she did a number of Florida stories, from the Highwaymen painters to a series supported by the Florida Humanities Council on Seminole clothing and traditions. She now writes fulltime and is completing her second family memoir about aging called *Tell Me Something Good*. She began regular visits to Florida in 2007. She lives in New York, Washington, D.C., and Wisconsin.



PHOTO BY BILL O'LEARY

Tom Scherberger, a communications consultant for the Florida Humanities Council, has worked as a reporter for four newspapers in the state, including for 20 years at the *St. Petersburg Times* (now *Tampa Bay Times*) as state editor, Tampa city editor, and editorial writer. He also worked as a reporter and editor for *The Orlando Sentinel* and *The Tampa Tribune*. He has extensive experience as a freelance writer and in public relations. He lives in Tampa with his wife, Janet Scherberger.



PHOTO BY JANET SCHERBERGER

Harriet Beecher Stowe's Florida

How the abolitionist author discovered resilience and vitality in the state's 'unconventional' landscape

By Michele Navakas

"For three hundred years has Florida been open to settlement," wrote American poet William Cullen Bryant in 1873 to the *New York Evening Post*. How, then, is much of the state "still for the most part a wilderness?" On a trip to Florida after the Civil War, Bryant saw swamps, sandy plains, pine trees, and scrub palmettoes; he saw very few conventionally neat dwellings, sturdy fences, green lawns, or fertile fields. Echoing the sentiments of many Northerners who visited post-Civil War Florida — the poorest, least populated, and arguably most undeveloped state in the South during that time — Bryant declared most of the peninsula the "despair of the cultivator."

Yet he found reason for hope just south of Jacksonville. For at Mandarin, a tiny village on the east bank of the St. Johns River, "Mrs. Stowe has her winter mansion, in the shadow of some enormous live oaks," surrounded by an orange grove.

We don't typically associate the author Harriet Beecher Stowe with Florida. Born in Litchfield, Connecticut, in 1811 to

Harriet Beecher Stowe's Florida writings are wide and varied, but across all of them one thing is clear: The place to which she returned for nearly 20 winters ultimately transformed her. She grew to love and embrace the energy and vitality of the same natural features that other Northerners deemed "wilderness" or evidence of the state's resistance to civilized life.



Harriet Beecher Stowe, by Francis Holl, after George Richmond. stipple engraving, circa 1855.

Roxana and Lyman Beecher, a prominent Presbyterian minister, Harriet Beecher married theologian Calvin Stowe, with whom she had seven children. The future author spent significant time in Hartford and then in Cincinnati, where she witnessed the nation's increasing racial unrest in the form of race riots, abolitionist meetings, African Americans escaping from slavery, bounty hunters seeking fugitive slaves, and other events that inspired her first novel, the abolitionist work and international bestseller, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852).



COURTESY OF HARRIET BEECHER STOWE CENTER, HARTFORD, CONN.

Oil of Harriet Beecher Stowe's Mandarin, Florida home, painted by Stowe circa 1867.

Written as she raised children at home in Maine, where the family had relocated for Calvin's teaching position at Bowdoin College, Stowe's novel caused a groundswell of anti-slavery sentiment so powerful that some credit her book with precipitating the Civil War.

Yet after the War, and during nearly every winter from 1868 to 1884, Stowe and her husband — accompanied by servants and an assortment of family members — traveled south from the family home in Hartford, by railroad and steamboat, to live in a renovated cottage at Mandarin.

Incorporated in 1841 and named after the orange variety, Mandarin would just begin to flourish by the time Stowe left Florida for good in the mid-1880s, when it boasted about 1,200 residents, a riverfront boardwalk, and several large estates and steamboat landings.

So what drew Stowe to Florida during the 1860s, and particularly to Mandarin, in the first place?

Her son, Frederick, was a Civil War veteran seeking a fresh



COURTESY OF HARRIET BEECHER STOWE CENTER, HARTFORD, CONN.

Photograph of Calvin and Harriet Beecher Stowe (seated) with unidentified man (standing left) outside the Stowe's Mandarin, Florida home, circa 1880.

start. To help him, Stowe leased a former cotton plantation called Laurel Grove, located on the west bank of the St. Johns River at present-day Orange Park. Stowe, her husband, and their son — accompanied by her nephew and his family — first visited Florida in 1867 and attempted to restore Laurel Grove to a fully functioning farm, assisted by recently freed African Americans hired as housekeepers, cooks, planters, and laborers.

Stowe chronicles the experience in a short story called "Our Florida Plantation" (1879), published in the *Atlantic Monthly*. There she recounts Laurel Grove's brief success . . . followed by total failure due to a cotton worm infestation.

The Stowe family abandoned Laurel Grove after just a few months. Yet there was one bright spot in that difficult winter of 1867: When rowing east across the St. Johns River to send and collect the mail at Mandarin, Stowe saw the cottage she would purchase as her winter home.

A champion of social reform

In Mandarin, Stowe found a warm place to write in peace, and a chance to expand her commitment to social reform by assisting African Americans who had been recently freed from slavery. She quickly began the complex process of planning and securing funding from the Freedman's Bureau for the construction of a combined schoolhouse and church. The school, built in 1869, served both black and white children until it was destroyed by fire, at which point Stowe and her neighbors continued instruction in their homes until the Mandarin Schoolhouse was built in 1872.

To serve the community's spiritual needs, Stowe's husband, Calvin, offered Episcopal church services open to all denominations (with separate services for black and white members), while Stowe assisted him and led Bible study groups for women. By 1883 the congregation had grown enough to merit a separate building, and funds were raised for the Church of Our Saviour, which endures to this day.

Stowe entertained visiting family members, including her siblings Catharine, Charles, and Henry, her youngest son, Charley, and her daughters, Hattie and Eliza. She fished and boated on the St. John's River and Julington Creek, and visited St. Augustine and other tourist destinations by railroad. She observed agricultural experiments on orange trees, cabbages, cucumbers, and other crops growing on the small farm at her Florida cottage.

The Florida writings

And, of course, she wrote — sometimes from a desk in her yard where she could see the St. Johns River.

Stowe was a prolific writer in Florida. She published a number of letters about the state in the *Christian Union*, a New York newspaper owned by her brother Henry Ward Beecher, in which she promoted Florida settlement, tourism, climate, scenery, agriculture, and employment opportunities for black and white residents.

Some of these letters appeared in her book, *Palmetto-Leaves* (1873), and the success of her Florida campaign is evident in the many letters she received from Northerners seeking additional

information about Florida opportunities. Her writings are often credited with the significant increase in Florida tourism during the mid-1870s, when Jacksonville and the St. Johns River became popular destinations.

Stowe's Florida writings are wide and varied, but across all of them one thing is clear: The place to which she returned for nearly 20 winters ultimately transformed her. She grew to love and embrace the energy and vitality of the same natural

features that other

Northerners, such as poet William Cullen Bryant, deemed "wilderness" or evidence of the state's resistance to civilized life. She delighted in swamps, orange trees, and the tangled roots of the scrub palmetto — a plant many settlers lamented, but Stowe chose as the inspiration for the title and cover image of her published collection of Florida letters.

Her delight in Florida's resistance to conventional order is apparent in a letter to friend and fellow writer George Eliot in which Stowe describes her discovery and early renovation of the Mandarin cottage.

"The history of the cottage is this," she writes. "I found a hut built close to a great live-oak twenty-five feet in girth, and with overarching boughs eighty feet up in the air, spreading like a firmament, and all swaying with mossy festoons. We began to live here, and gradually we improved the hut by lath, plaster, and paper. Then we threw out a side veranda all round, for in these regions the veranda is the living-room."

Stowe describes how the family had to build their veranda around the massive trunk of the oak tree, and how they added on gables and chambers, just "as a tree throws out new branches," so that the cottage "seems as if it were half tree, or something that had grown out of the tree."

The tree architecture of Stowe's Florida home was a local attraction. In many of the photos and artistic renderings of the cottage — including Stowe's own oil painting of it — the live oak pushing through the roof takes center stage, as if to declare the inhabitants' intention to adapt to the local landscape by disregarding any effort at symmetry, order, or intentional design. Stowe's winter home appeared "peculiar and original," she wrote to her friend. And yet, Stowe concludes, "we settle into it with real enjoyment."



Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Palmetto-Leaves* (1873), cover featuring scrub-palmetto.

After the War, and during nearly every winter from 1868 to 1884, Stowe and her husband — accompanied by servants and an assortment of family members — traveled south from the family home in Hartford, by railroad and steamboat, to live in a renovated cottage at Mandarin.

At home in Mandarin, Stowe found beauty and vitality in Florida's opposition to familiar forms of cultivation. Writing to her son Charles, she reported that her garden is more like a "jungle," and that the lawn is "littered with fallen oranges" and covered with "rampant" roots. Elsewhere, she writes of the "raptures and frenzies of growth," and the "green labyrinths made by the tangling vines," of the swamp fronting her home. On the whole the place is "shockingly untidy," she declared — and yet, it is also "so beautiful that I am quite willing to forgive its disorder."

An appreciation for nature's resistance to order is similarly evident in a number of oil paintings that Stowe made while wintering at Mandarin, such as "Yellow Jessamine" and "Orange Fruit & Blossoms," which portrays oranges so lively that they appear to push against the painting's frame.

This appreciation pervades Stowe's descriptions of life in *Palmetto-Leaves*, where she explains the difference between Florida and New England: In New England nature is a "smart, decisive house-mother" that sharply freezes and thaws at predictable "times and seasons;" Florida nature is more like a grandmother who "does everything when she happens to feel like it," alternating unpredictably between warmth and sudden cold snaps. But this atmospheric fickleness makes for a much more interesting life, a "tumble-down, wild, picknicky" existence filled with unexpected energy.

Palmetto-Leaves is ultimately a settlers' guide, practical and whimsical. The book offers instructions for buying good land, building a home, hiring local laborers, and establishing schools for the recently emancipated. It also recommends impromptu picnics, twilight steamboat rides, and rambles through "magical" palmetto groves.



Oil panel of "Orange fruit & blossoms" by Harriet Beecher Stowe c. 1867-1884

COURTESY OF HARRIET BEECHER STOWE CENTER, HARTFORD, CONN.

An important message is that, while Florida may appear to resist settlement or progress, appearances can deceive. The same characteristics that sometimes make Florida seem averse to growth could actually be signs of its capacity for energetic development.

This message is most fully exhibited by Florida's orange trees and scrub palmettoes. In a letter about the frost of 1835, Stowe tells of a Mandarin grove that appeared to die that year. However, the trees soon "sprang up again" and vigorously bore fruit, thereby offering "lessons in perseverance" for people "struggling to found a colony here."

The same hidden resilience flows through the scrub palmetto. True, she reflects, this lowly shrub, native to the Florida peninsula, will never attain the "grace" or "perfect shape" of that other species, the tall Sabal palm. Yet it possesses a hardiness that "these regions" require: "catching into the earth by strong rootlets, and then rising up here and there," the scrub palmettoes "burst forth into a graceful crest of waving green" leaves. Scrub palmetto leaves make an ideal cover image for Stowe's settlers' guide to Florida. Embossed in gold against red, the leaves attest that flourishing in Florida requires continual adaptation to its unique landscape.

Stowe lived until 1896, but stopped visiting Florida after 1884 due to Calvin's failing health. Today, a historical marker commemorates the site where her winter home once stood, while the Mandarin Museum features a permanent exhibit on Stowe in Florida. The 1872 Mandarin Schoolhouse still

exists, maintained by the Mandarin Community Club. The Church of Our Saviour — destroyed by Hurricane Dora in 1964, then rebuilt on the site of the original church of 1883 — continues to serve the community. And Stowe's letters, stories, and paintings of Florida remain as a testament to the vital possibilities of a place that has never been conventional.