

SETTLEMENT PATTERNS IN A NORTH FLORIDA SANDHILL REGION

A study of settlement, land tenure, and resource extraction shows the resilience of homesteading families that migrated into harsh sandhill environments in the north Florida frontier during the post-territorial period. The study identified 21 cultural sites which I tracked through boom-and-bust cycles between 1847 and 1900 in what is now the 9,370-acre Katherine Ordway-Carl Swisher Biological Station, in Putnam County, Florida.

Several patterns are evident: 1) first families (with slaves) arrived prior to the Civil War and established farms on the most fertile sites, 2) early families arrived pre-adapted to life in the harsh north Florida sandhills (many moved here from the sandhills of SC and GA), 3) low soil fertility limited farm production, 4) local families endured the Civil War years, with family members fighting for the Confederacy, 5) introduction of the sweet orange in 1870s attracted new families to the area (including first African-American families, e.g., the Cues and Smiths), 6) severe winter freezes in the mid-1890s brought an end to the orange boom in the region, and 7) previous subsistence agriculture gave way to recreational uses of the land by non-resident landowners.

Carl Swisher (tobacco family) bought failing farms (offering life estates to residents) beginning in 1926 to create his own personal fishing preserve. The Swisher properties eventually lead to the establishment of the Ordway-Swisher Biological Station, owned and managed by the University of Florida.

Local lake names reflect the families who lived on that lake, when surveyors came through. These names occur on various vintage maps, e.g. Fennel Lake in 1870 when James Fennel lived there, later changed to Ross Lake when the Ross family lived there. There were also spelling issues. We have McCloud Lake on the property, but no McClouds. Instead there were the McLeods, which sounded very similar to McCloud, hence a mistake in spelling.

Following Carl Swisher's death in 1972, the property was divided into four parcels: 6000 acres were sold by Swisher's son Walter to a land development company. This tract was eventually sold to Florida Rock and finally to Vulcan. 3,000 acres were donated by the Swisher family to The Nature Conservancy (basically the Mill Creek drainage). Funds to purchase 6,000 acres was donated to the UF Foundation by the Kathrine Ordway Foundation. And several hundred acres on the east side of Putnam Prairie were subdivided and sold as the Swisher Lakes Estates. Monies from the initial sale of these Swisher lots went for the establishment of two distinguished graduate research professor positions at UF and towards management funds John F. Eisenberg was appointed to one of these esteemed chair positions and was also appointed the Director of the Ordway Preserve. He remained in this position until he retired.

MY HISTORY ON THE PROPERTY. I joined the Florida Museum faculty at UF in 1972 to conduct research, help build scientific collections, and develop museum exhibits. I was assigned to work with John Eisenberg soon after his arrival at UF in 1982. He wanted his new Ordway staff to include faculty members, who had connections with both the museum and the Department of Wildlife Ecology & Conservation. He wanted me because of my specific knowledge of local plants and animals.

Mel Sunquist and I became associated with the property at the same time. One of my first assignments was to produce vegetative and cultural lists and maps for the property. I also worked closely with Mel and Truman Perry to manage the property. We burned the woods together for 25 years. Mel and I conducted research, managed students, and taught Wildlife Techniques on the property. I lived in the Smith Lake house for 2 years. John, Mel, Truman, and I are all retired now. The TNC and UF parcels are now combined as the Ordway-Swisher Biological Station, and managed by IFAS.

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