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# HAMILTON DISSTON and the Development of Florida

Dr. Joe Knetsch

One of the most enduring mysteries in the history of Florida is the “man”, Hamilton Disston. Little has ever been published about this individual's life or his many accomplishments. What is “known” is based upon few primary sources, and those have not been evaluated for accuracy. None of the few works that discuss the "Gilded Age" politics have ever delved into the life behind the man who bailed Florida out of its worst financial embarrassment. Even the story of his death is questionable, if, in fact, not totally erroneous. It is the goal of this article to shed some light onto this unknown individual and maybe encourage greater primary research into the background of those who have helped to shape our destinies.

That Hamilton Disston was a congenial person has been testified to by many who knew the young man. Born on August 23, 1844, he was educated at home, like many children of his day, and at the age of fifteen, he became a full-time apprentice in his father's factory on Laurel Street, in Philadelphia. His father was an inventive, strong willed and talented man, whose mechanical abilities came naturally through Hamilton's grandfather, Thomas Disston, of Tewkesbury, Gloucestershire, England. The adaptable Henry Disston migrated to America with his family in 1833, only to lose his father three days after their arrival. Left to his own devices, he apprenticed himself to a saw-maker and began a career that reads like a Horatio Alger tale. With a start of only \$350, he began his own manufacturing firm in 1840, and after some

early struggles with land- lords and lenders, established himself at Front and Laurel Street, two years after Hamilton's birth. The elder Disston's skills could not be denied, and he looked to become independent of imported British steel. In 1855, he constructed his own steel mill, producing some of the highest grade crucible steel to be found anywhere. This gave him the edge over much of his competition, foreign or domestic. So successful was the Disston works, that they were not affected by the severe Panic of 1857. Young Hamilton, observing first-hand many of his father's administrative touches and inventive capacity, probably made mental notes of those that were most successful.<sup>1</sup>

The Civil War brought many changes to the Disston firm, primarily the need to produce war materials for the Union Army. For the purpose of making metal plates, whose importation was disrupted by Confederate raiders, Henry Disston constructed his own rolling mill. He also erected an experimental sawmill to test his saws on various types of wood for the purpose of more efficient cutting and precision. The father also experimented with new saw types, improved the quality of the steel and any number of improvements in various war materials. In the interest of the firm and national defense, he encouraged employees to spot defects and suggest improvements.<sup>2</sup> The firm aside from it's primary business primary business, also produced scabbards, swords, guns, knapsack mountings, army curbits, etc. for the military effort. In addition to his production, Henry Disston offered each of his employees who joined the colors half as much in addition to what the government

would pay, and guaranteed them their jobs upon returning from the war.<sup>3</sup>

According to Harry C. Silcox, in his recent book on the Disston works, Hamilton wanted to enlist in the Army immediately upon President Lincoln's call for volunteers. Twice, Hamilton attempted to enlist, only to find his place taken by someone who was paid an enlistment bonus by his father, who insisted he was needed in the business. To relieve this tension, Hamilton increased his interest in the Northern Liberties Volunteer Fire Company. As the story goes, the fires became so frequent that Hamilton was often missing answering the fire bell. Hamilton's popularity among this group of young men was great enough that, in the end, his father relented and allowed him and 100 "Disston Volunteers" to serve their time. The father went so far as to equip the entire unit. When the war ended in 1865, Hamilton returned to the firm and was created a partner in the new business of Henry Disston & Son.<sup>4</sup>

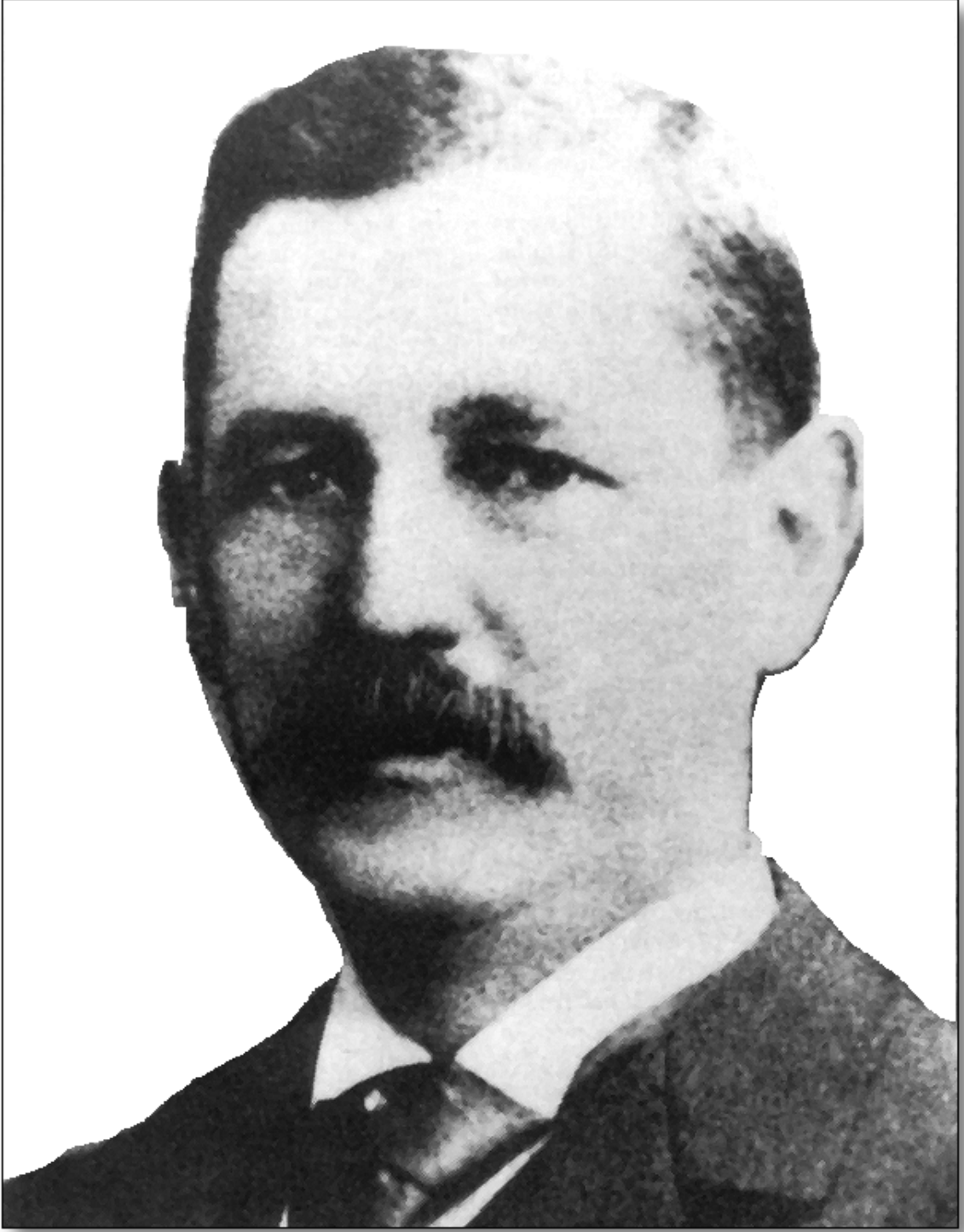
Assisted by a protective tariff policy and a growing demand for saws of all kinds, the years immediately following the war were very prosperous for the firm. New lines of products were introduced, including a new line of files developed during the war. According to a handbook from the company, "During the War we were unable to obtain files which would give us satisfaction and were compelled to manufacture our own. We spent thousands of dollars in perfecting our arrangements for manufacturing files."<sup>5</sup> Hamilton lost his social outlet when the volunteer fire department was discontinued in 1870 and this led him into one of his first ventures into politics. The prosperity of the firm and the free time that this allowed the "partner" meant a change of roles, one congenial with the growing need to market the company's new products and the move

of the Disston works to the new area of Tacony.

Hamilton, like his father, was a strong Republican and favored the protective tariff. His growing interest in politics led him into the embroglio of the Philadelphia wards. In the beginning, he was allied with many of the so-called "bosses" of the wards, including James McManes (the city gas works "czar"), William Leeds and David H. Lane. He helped one of his old Northern Liberties Hose Company colleagues, John A. Loughridge, into the post of prothonotary to the Court of Common Pleas.<sup>6</sup> One-time governor of Pennsylvania, Samuel W. Pennypacker, noted in his autobiography, that, in 1875, Hamilton Disston was the ward leader in the Twenty-ninth ward, and was assisted by William U. Moyer. He also makes it clear that anything that went on in the ward, had to have Disston's approval,<sup>7</sup> Pennypacker which he claims he disliked. Pennypacker describes his group's defeat at the hands of Disston and his allies when he attempted to reform the precinct:

"We hired a hall, notified every Republican, held a meeting which was largely attended and selected a ticket. For a time it looked as though we would succeed, but we failed at the last moment through the better discipline of our opponents and the superior practical knowledge which comes with it. The evening of the primary turned out to be cold, and blasts of snow filled the air. The well-to-do citizens upon whom we relied sat at home by their fires in comfort. Their servants rode in carriages, hired by the more shrewd regulars, to the polls and voted against us."<sup>8</sup>

The future governor learned from his tactical error and soon was on the way to more



**Portrait of Hamilton Disston.**

Courtesy of University of South Florida Library Special Collections.

personal successes. Meanwhile, having learned how to control the ward, Hamilton shifted his efforts, somewhat, to the family-created settlement of Tacony, where he served innocuously as a Fairmount Park Commissioner, while controlling the town through his Magistrate (and real estate agent) Tom South.<sup>9</sup>

Disston's interest in politics also made him friends on the national level. With an ability to help finance investment schemes as well as political campaigns, Disston had the ears of some of Pennsylvania's most powerful and influential. Among those who readily listened to and cooperated with Disston were Wharton Barker (once head of the Finance Company of Pennsylvania), Thomas Scott, Jr., the heir to the Pennsylvania Railroad former president's fortune and later, a partner in some of Disston's Florida ventures, and, most importantly, Matt Quay, U. S. Senator and "Boss" of that body. Through Quay, a high tariff man in his own right, Disston sought to keep the price of imported steel and, later, sugar, high.<sup>10</sup> He shared with his father, a strong feeling of getting things done, in politics as well as business. And, again, like his father, who, in 1876, served as a Hayes elector from Philadelphia, Hamilton attended to the political interests by attending the 1888 Republican National Convention as an at-large delegate.<sup>11</sup>

The Disston family also had investments other than their own saw-works. Hamilton's father, Henry, saw a need to keep ahead of the rest of the industry, and, as noted before, constructed his own rolling mill, an experimental saw-mill and other smaller ventures near the family works. However, he also invested in a saw-mill operation in Atlantic City, New Jersey, which helped to supply the saw works with handles for many of their tools.<sup>12</sup> Hamilton was more

adventurous with his money and was an officer in the Keystone Chemical Company, the Florida land ventures and a railroad trust/syndicate, capitalized at \$20,000,000 in China. This last venture was in association with Wharton Barker, Samuel R. Shipley (President of the Provident Life and Trust Company), and others.<sup>13</sup> It should also be pointed out that the Disston family owned much of the land in and around Tacony and a substantial sum was earned over the years from this investment.

As a manager of the Disston works upon Henry Disston's death in 1878, in his fifty-ninth year, Hamilton had received mixed approval and doubt. The firm's history, done by two members of the family and one other, states: "The general supervision of the establishment now devolved on Hamilton Disston, who possessed the quick eye and sound judgment of his father. He, together with his brothers, ... having served full apprenticeships in the shops, and with Albert H. devoting himself to the general financial and office management, was competent from a mechanical as well as a business point of view to carry along the intentions of the founder, and the steadily increasing business was pushed to proportions perhaps unexpected by him." The story is told, in this loosely official history, that when the plant was visited by President Rutherford B. Hayes, Hamilton showed the president a rough piece of steel, which, he stated, he would convert into a thoroughly finished saw before the entourage left the building. Exactly forty-two minutes later, he presented the president with a new 26-inch handsaw, engraved with Hayes full name upon it. It had passed through twenty-four different processes in that short period of time.<sup>14</sup> Another source noted that Hamilton was, "a keen, progressive executive. Under his management the business expanded materially."<sup>15</sup> Harry Silcox, in his study of

the Disston Saw Works, states that Hamilton spent too much time away from Tacony to be any major factor in the firm's success, and that his brothers and uncle, Samuel, were more responsible for the growth.<sup>16</sup> Edward C. Williamson, in his tract on *Florida Politics in the Gilded Age*, paints Hamilton Disston as a nouveau riche Philadelphia society clubman who defied his father's wish to keep his eye on the family business and went his own way, something like the prodigal son.<sup>17</sup> Which ever the judgment, it cannot be denied that Hamilton Disston was a figure of importance and controversy.

It is generally agreed that Disston's first trip to Florida came in 1877, at the behest of Henry Sanford, who had served in various capacities in Republican circles, including a stint as Ambassador to Belgium. According to one writer, the first attraction was the "lunker black bass" found in Florida waters. However, given the lack of subsequent reporting of Mr. Disston's fondness for fishing, even while residing in Florida, this speculation may be questioned. What is clear is that Mr. Disston became very interested in the agricultural possibilities of the State, assuming it could find a way to remove the water that often covered the entire state south of Orange County. By 1879, he came to the firm conviction that the drainage of the upper portions of the Everglades, as he saw them, could be reclaimed from the morass of South Florida.

What was needed was a means to acquire title to the swamp and overflowed lands of the area and then bring in the equipment to do the job. Disston soon convinced fellow Philadelphians, Albert B. Linderman, Whitfield Drake and William H. Wright, along with William C. Parsons, of Arizona, and Ingham Coryell of Florida to invest in a corporation for the drainage of the swamp

lands of southern Florida. By the shrewd device of not paying any cash, but assuming the expenses of the actual drainage, the new corporation, known as the Atlantic and Gulf Coast Canal and Okeechobee Land Company, was able to work an arrangement with the Board of Trustees of the Internal Improvement Trust Fund, the State's agency charged with the responsibility to encourage a "liberal system of internal improvements". The avoidance of payment was used to circumvent the obligations of the Trustees under the injunction placed upon them by Francis Vose and others Vose,<sup>18</sup> and his colleagues, had provided the Florida Railroad with iron and had invested in its bonds toward the end of the Civil War and expected to be paid at par, plus interest, for their redemption. After numerous legal wrangling, a New York Federal Court placed the injunction on the Trustees which forbid them to sell or bargain away any State lands until Vose and friends had been paid in full. This forced the Trustees to seek large, corporate buyers for its land and effectually stopped using land as an enticement for railroad investment. By late 1880, the sum owed to Vose had risen to just over \$1,000,000. Because the Internal Improvement Trust Fund was (and is) separate from general revenues and restricted in its mission to funding internal improvements, this injunction placed the State in a bind and virtually ended any major railroad construction for nearly a decade.

The drainage contract, which was signed by all parties on March 10, 1881, called for the company to drain and reclaim all of the swamp and overflowed lands in the area south of Township 24 and east of Peace River.<sup>19</sup> When 200,000 acres of land had been reclaimed by the company, the State would begin deeding alternate sections of the reclaimed swamp and overflowed lands to it. Thereafter, the State would issue deeds



as the work progressed. The State would benefit by getting half of the reclaimed land, which would now be worth a great deal more, and the company would benefit by gaining title to the other half of the land. Hopefully, the land would sell at a price that would allow the company to recover all costs, with some profit left over for the investors. The corporation soon issued 600,000 shares of stock at \$10 per share, and began to assemble the 20 dredges that were to accomplish the task.<sup>20</sup>

The drainage contract received some national attention that was the beginning of a new era in the awareness of Florida by the print media of the day. On February 18, 1881, *The New York Times* reported:

An immense transaction, involving the reclamation of 12,000,000 acres of land, or one-third of one of the States of the Union, has been undertaken by a company of Philadelphia gentlemen with every prospect of success. ... The project of reclaiming this wonderfully rich country has been talked of for years, and it has long been considered feasible by many noted engineers. ... The leading man in the enterprise is Hamilton Disston, a young gentleman of great business energy and ample fortune, and present head of the great saw-manufacturing firm of Henry Disston & Sons. ... Under the agreement already made with the State, the company is required to begin surveys within 60 days, and within six months to put a force equal to 100 men on the work, and continue as expeditiously as possible until it is completed.

It is proposed to drain the land by a canal from Lake Okeechobee to the Caloosahatchee River, which empties into the Gulf of Mexico. Another canal

may also be constructed to the east, tapping the St. Lucie River, which flows into the Atlantic. These canals will entirely drain the swamp, and from ten to twelve million acres of the richest land in the world will be reclaimed. The company will receive for the work one half of the land recovered, and it is expected that this will largely repay all expenditure of money that may be made in the work. ... The entire property of the company is below the frost line, and there would be no such damage done to orange plantations as those in Northern Florida have suffered this Winter. ... Each share will carry with it the right to an acre of land. The stock will be put on the Philadelphia Stock Exchange, and is expected will be sold readily. Several applications for stock have already been made by prominent gentlemen in this city.<sup>21</sup>

Within a short time, after the negotiation of the purchase of these type of lands by Disston, international attention was to be drawn to Florida and the land boom of the 1880s began.

On May 30, 1881, Governor William D. Bloxham announced to his colleagues on the Board of Trustees of the Internal Improvement Trust Fund, that he had, "gone to Philadelphia and had there entered into articles of agreement with Hamilton Disston for the sale to said Disston of four million acres of land at twenty-five cents per acre, and placed said articles before the Board for the action of the Trustees." On the following day, the Trustees accepted the deal and approved the articles of agreement.<sup>22</sup> *The New York Times* reported the sale on June 17, 1881:

Philadelphia, June 16. - What is claimed to be the largest purchase of land ever made by a single person in the world occurred today, when Hamilton Disston, a prominent manufacturer of this city, closed a contract by which he secured 4,000,000 acres of land from the State of Florida. This huge transaction has been in negotiation for several months, and its success was owing to the shrewd tactics on the part of the agents of Mr. Disston. The land acquired, a tract nearly as large as the State of New Jersey, was a part of the public domain of the State of Florida under control of the Board of Internal Improvement of the State. Owing to the recent improved value of the land of Florida, this property has been anxiously looked after by capitalists of New York and Boston. ... there were renewed efforts on the part of the New York people, who were backed by a well-known German banking house of that city, and the syndicate from London, headed by ex-United States Minister to Belgium Sanford and the Boston capitalists to buy the land. ... The tract is situated north of Lake Okeechobee, and is nearly all below the frost line. ... It is Mr. Disston's intention to at once begin an emigration scheme which will result in a very large addition to the population of Florida. To this end, he has already established agencies in several places in this country, and will at once organize bureaus in England, Scotland, France, Germany, Holland and Italy.<sup>23</sup>

In fact, the emigration centers had already been ordered and people of influence contacted. One of the principle negotiators for Disston with the Trustees was the venerable John A. Henderson, one of the most influential men in the State at the time. Ingham

Coryell, whose contacts include General Sanford and James Ingraham, was also, no doubt involved in the laying of the base for this transaction, although this does need further investigation.

In the words of Bloxham's biographer, "No single event in Florida's history has equaled this one in economic significance."<sup>24</sup> The simple terms of the agreement required a first payment of \$200,000 and the balance at agreed upon intervals. The entire amount was due on January 1, 1882. At the receipt of the first payment, Disston received a deed for 250,000 acres of land. Upon receipt of the first payment, which was immediately applied to paying off the Vose debt, railroad companies began lining up to get Trustees approval for their schemes. No fewer than ten such firms, who had all anticipated this sale, were waiting for the release of the lands destined to develop the lands of Florida. Among the most anxious was an Englishman, member of Parliament, Sir Edward James Reed, whose interest in Florida was already well established and who was prepared, even at that moment, to purchase the ailing Florida Central Railroad. Disston made his first payment even before the due date and, by September 1, 1881, had made payments of \$500,000, in cash, with the exception of \$15,000 in coupons.

About this time, Disston was negotiating with Sir Edward J. Reed for the eventual purchase of half of the 4,000,000 acres. These negotiations were very discreet and little record of their occurrence has been left to posterity.<sup>25</sup> By December 17, 1881, Sir Edward, as he was known in England, had entered into an agreement with Disston to handle his half of the purchase and all that was left was to get the Trustees to agree to their arrangement. On the following day, Disston addressed a letter to the Trustees explaining the deal:



Sir Edward Reed, of England, as you know represents large Rail Road interests in your State. I have succeeded in interesting him more directly in South Florida. He will take Two Million acres of my purchase and as I understand him, at once arrange a Land Company in England which will rapidly send many purchasers of land to Florida. He will proceed to Tallahassee without delay in order to complete the transfer to him of his part of my purchase, and will bring with him full details of the arrangement between him and myself. He will make the remaining payments due on my purchase ...<sup>26</sup>

Reed, of course, was not alone in the deal, and had already informed Disston of his contact with Dr. Jacobus Wirtheimer and other Dutch investors. Both Reed and Wirtheimer were involved in various railroads in Florida, including the Florida Southern Railroad and the Pensacola and Atlantic Railroad.<sup>27</sup> On January 17, 1882, Reed sent the Trustees a copy of the arrangement between himself, Wirtheimer and Disston.<sup>28</sup> Reed was later to ask for extensions of time to make the payments, but did complete same by December 26, 29 1882.<sup>29</sup>

The sale of so much land could not but arouse the ire of many of Bloxham's political enemies and some of the other interests who had lost out in the bidding. Politicians, pandering to the big vote, small money, medium to small farmer, screamed at the give-away to large corporations. Some noted the fact that foreigners were getting all of the choice land and leaving honest homesteaders the scrap land.<sup>30</sup> One of the most visible critics of the sale was the editor of the *Fernandina Mirror*, the scholarly George R. Fairbanks. He noted that northern

states supported education, improvements and other functions through the sale of their public lands and they did not let them go for 25 cents per acre. The negotiations for the sale, he maintained, were held in secret with no public input whatsoever. Only the extreme poverty of a misrun government could cause such a calamity as this sale. *The Sunland Tribune* of Tampa, also spoke out against the "giveaway" because its editor, J. B. Wall, feared that Disston would select all of the good land in Hillsborough County and ruin any chance of attracting a railroad to the port city.<sup>31</sup> Another group who protested the sale were squatters and new homesteaders. The former because their practiced way of life would now be seriously curtailed, the latter because the land company may claim the land before the required five years for a valid claim could pass, thereby depriving them a chance of good land.<sup>32</sup> Many of these complaints were very legitimate and real. The threat posed by the sale, did make life for some of these groups very uneasy.

Disston was well aware of the problems the sale would have regarding settlers and squatters. He understood going into the deal that legitimate settlers on the land should be allowed to purchase their land at the State price, \$1.25 per acre, and agreed to the stipulation that these settlers had up to one and a half years to lay their claims before the land office to get this price. However, what displeased him most was the fact that the language used by the Trustees was that all settlers now upon the land could get this price. All settlers, Florida Land and Improvement Company Secretary Richard Salinger noted, "includes Squatters pure and simple." However, Disston agreed to this language because, "it would be better to include this class as it might lead to complications which it were better to avoid."<sup>33</sup>

As to the cooperation of Disston with railroad interests, who may or would have claims within the lands his agents selected, Disston, himself, pointed out his total cooperation with the South Florida Railroad Company and the Jacksonville, Tampa and Key West Railroad.<sup>34</sup> Disston seldom had any major disagreement with the railroad interests of the State, except W. D. Chipley, the aggressive vice-president and general superintendent of the Pensacola and Atlantic Railroad, who claimed some of the swamp and overflowed land in southern Florida should be reserved for his, and other, railroads.<sup>35</sup> Disston's aid was vital, in the end, to the completion of the railroad to St. Petersburg constructed by Peter Demens. It was Disston, who could not reach a final agreement with Demens, who introduced the sometimes cantankerous Russian to Phillip Armour, the Drexels of Philadelphia and financier Edward T. Stokesbury, and thus provided the means to the salvation of the Orange Belt Railway.<sup>36</sup> Disston, himself, later became the builder and part-owner of the St. Cloud and Sugar Belt Railroad, and always had an appreciation for the power of the rail. It should be noted that Disston had, at first, contemplated a railroad to cover the and Caloosahatchee valleys, which was to be built under the name of "The Kissimmee Valley and Gulf Railway".<sup>37</sup>

One of the most severe criticisms of the sale was the problem created by the designation of swamp and overflowed lands as those to be sold. Much of the confusion, then and now, comes from the definition of swamp and overflowed given in the Swamp and Overflowed Lands Act of 1850. The crux of the question revolves around the language which designated lands as swamp and overflowed if they were covered with water, all or part of the time, and thus made unfit for cultivation. If the lands could be diked or leveed off and drained so as to make them

useful for agriculture, then they could be granted to the states as swamp and overflowed. This definition also applied to a section of land which could be surveyed, in which fifty percent or more of the lands in such a section were of this description. In fact and practice, this meant that many of the swamp land deeds would, of necessity, contain large portions of dry uplands. This fact was not lost on the Disston interests. On October 18, 1881, shortly after the purchase was made, Ingham Coryell wrote to Governor Bloxham suggesting that the State and the land company resolve the problem of high and dry land, before any public outcry could take place:

I now propose on the part of the Land Company, "That we select by personal inspection all the high & dry lands within the limits of the reclamation district so soon as the condition of the waters will allow it, and that the State join us in the inspection by the appointment of an inspector to represent the State, and all lands returned as not subject to overflows be taken by the Land Company. ... to accomplish the object of setting at rest finally & forever any contention as between the State & our reclamation company as to what are & what are not reclaimed lands, would be pleased to have them do so. Some mode of settlement at this stage would perhaps avoid a vexed questioning in the future. We now have all the evidences of what are or are not, overflowed Lands & plenty of reliable Witnesses to prove the fact. If affected by drainage, the proof would not be so satisfactory."<sup>38</sup>

However, the Trustees did not respond to this suggestion. Problems, as predicted by Coryell, did, indeed, plague the project from this very lack of definition. It is no surprise

that most land historians consider this act one of the most ill-designed land acts ever passed by Congress or administered by the General Land Office.

But, regardless of the criticisms, some did appreciate and defend the Disston Purchase. One of the most ardent of these defenders was Charles E. Dyke, editor of the *Tallahassee Floridian*. This newspaper, as it was known at the time, was the organ of the State's Democratic Party. Yet, it does not diminish the importance of his views, when it is known that most of the registered, white voters were Democrats. After laying out the main features of the purchase contract, Dyke wrote:

As we have heretofore stated, the sale has our heartiest endorsement as a financial transaction in every way meeting the peculiar exigencies of the case. Indeed, under all the circumstances, it is difficult to see how the Board could have done otherwise to accomplish the purpose in view. The debt against the Fund already amounted to some \$900,000, and was constantly increasing, in effect bearing compound interest. The expenses of litigation, added to the interest, annually increased the debt, notwithstanding the large sales of land and the application of the proceeds to its payment. The natural and inevitable result would have been the entire absorption of the lands belonging to the Fund in a few years, leaving nothing for internal improvements. Besides, all this, the creditors, cognizant of these facts, were preparing to apply to the courts to have the entire Fund and all its interests turned over to them, or to have some five or six millions of acres set apart and deeded to them in satisfaction of their claims. Had the

Trustees remained quiet and allowed this to be done they would have been justly subject to censure; ...<sup>39</sup>

This defense of the Trustees' action was taken up by many of the other newspapers throughout the State and helped, in some measure, relieve some of the pressure on the Governor and the company.

As to the actual work of the drainage company, it began with two dredges, one beginning the work of connecting East Lake Tohopekaliga with Lake Tohopekaliga, and the other began work on the canal which would open Lake Okeechobee to the Caloosahatchee River in South Florida. The Trustees were notified of the commencement of work on November 7, 1881, by the president of the Atlantic Gulf Coast and Okeechobee Land Company, Samuel H. Grey, who had replaced William H. Stokely. Hamilton Disston, was the treasurer of that company, but president of the Florida Land and Improvement Company, which handled the land sales transactions for much of the Purchase lands. The success of the reclamation project was noticeable in a very short time. Francis A. Hendry, one of the early promoters of the drainage project, told the *Florida Daily Times*, in early 1882, that the work on the southern end of the project was begun in earnest on January 20, 1882, and had resulted in a canal 28 feet wide and 5 feet deep and one mile in length. This short canal had already shown evidence, according to the Captain, of an increased velocity of the water headed toward the Gulf and had begun to scour out a deeper and wider channel on its own. This, he believed, would eventually result in a large canal that would help to lower Lake Okeechobee some six feet and expose some one million fertile acres to agricultural use.<sup>40</sup> The northern work experienced one of the most famous

incidents in the history of the drainage project.

On November 22nd, [1883] the last dams on the line of canal were cut, and vent given to the waters of the lake. A number of visitors assembled to witness the interesting event. The first rush of the waters carried away the last vestige of the dams, and accumulations in the canal, and the velocity of the current established was sufficient to scour out the softer strata composing the bed of the canal, to a depth several feet below the line of excavation. ... During the first thirty days, the lake surface fell thirty-six inches. ... East Lake Tohopekaliga, formerly surrounded by cypress and marsh margins, has developed a beautiful wide sand beach, the bordering lands are elevated and marshes changed to rich meadow lands.<sup>41</sup>

The Southport canal was the first to be completed, in 1883. In the northern area, this canal connected Lake Tohopekaliga to Lake Cypress. The canal cut off the tortuous channel, now called Dead River, and greatly shortened the length of time to ship goods southward from Kissimmee City, which was founded as a result of the company's efforts. The city of Southport, where the canal leaves Lake Tohopekaliga, was founded within a year of the canal being opened, so much had the level of the big lake fallen. Narcoosee and Runnymede were also founded on reclaimed land in the area and settled by English colonists.

Most importantly for the direct future of Florida was the establishment of the St. Cloud Sugar Plantation. Because Pat Dodson has written so well on this topic, I will only summarize its accomplishments here. After the reclamation of some of the

land near Southport, an experimental patch of 20 acres of sugar cane were planted there in land that was covered with muck and two to three feet of water the year before. The results, monitored by Captain Clay Johnson and John W. Bryan for Mr. Disston, were astonishing. Rufus E. Rose, Clay Johnson's brother-in-law, and later State Chemist, began planting on a larger scale. Disston, in 1887, personally bought half interest in the St. Cloud Sugar Plantation and increased its capital so as to allow the planting of 1,800 acres. The result was a record harvest and yield, higher than any recorded in the United States to that time. Disston soon brought down contractors to erect a sugarmill, costing nearly \$350,000. The mill had a capacity of producing 372 tons per day, much above the average of 200 tons elsewhere. The sugar produced by the plant, in spite of the lack of sophisticated machinery, was excellent and profitable. Congress, in 1890, to aid in the domestic production of sugar, helped the enterprise along by paying a bounty of 2 cents per pound. As Dodson noted: "Influenced by the bounty, advice from sugar experts, and by increasing consumer demand for sugar, Disston took in more associates, and reorganized the plantation under the name of the Florida Sugar Manufacturing Company. It was capitalized at a \$1,000,000, and an additional 36,000 acres were added to the holdings." Financially, this investment did not pan out well, even though the production was high. The panic of 1893 played a role in the financial loss sustained in this investment, but, more importantly, the bounty so gratuitously given by Congress in 1890, was removed in 1894 by a hostile Cleveland administration. With late 1894 and early 1895 came the freezes that so destroyed the citrus industry, and with it, land prices, upon which the whole operation depended, became ridiculously low. Although things picked up in 1895, it was not sustained long

enough for Hamilton Disston to realize any major profit before his death in April of the following year.<sup>42</sup>

Other problems had an impact on the whole scheme of the drainage and -land sales. For the drainage project, the problem existed of the amount of land actually reclaimed and deeded to the company. In spite of two very favorable inspections by state appointed engineers, the legislature, in 1885-86 ordered an investigation into the claims of the company and the commission appointed by the Governor found the company had exaggerated its reclamation and that it was not entitled to all of the lands it claimed as a result of its efforts.

The political nature of this commission can be seen in the appointment of J. J. Daniel, of Jacksonville, a highly skilled surveyor and attorney, who forthrightly wrote to Governor Edward A. Perry, informing him that as a president of a railroad company, with interests, as an attorney, in other such firms, he was technically not qualified to be on the commission according to law. The Governor overlooked these problems and appointed him, along with J. Davidson of Escambia County and Col. John Bradford of Leon County, as commissioner.<sup>43</sup> Indicative of the tenor of the investigation, Daniel wrote to Perry:

Dear Gov. After consultation with my associates, I write to say that we do not consider any of the lands lying South of the section line which runs two miles North of and parallel to the township line between townships 27 and 28 South, as reclaimed by the work of the drainage company. There are lands within the drainage district North of this line around Lake Gentry and Alligator Lake and in the water-shed of Reedy Creek which have

not been effected by the lowering of the waters of Tohopekaliga Lakes.

...we have not carefully examined the lands around Lake Rosalie and Walk in-the-Water and it may be that there has been a partial reclamation effected here, though from the examination we made below, that is around Tiger Lake, we are not disposed to think that the waters of Rosalie and Walk-in-the-Water can have been very materially reduced.<sup>44</sup>

Although later reports from Daniel indicated that the drainage had some impact on the removal of water from the land in the northern area, the company was forced to reconvey some lands already deeded to it and modify some of its operations in order to reach the magic 200,000 acres required by the drainage contract. Throughout the ordeal, Disston and his engineer, James Kreamer, maintained that the company had 45 done exactly as it claimed.<sup>45</sup>

By March of 1889, Kreamer was reporting to Governor Francis Fleming that the progress was becoming more rapid and that many of the promised canals had been dredged. His report of progress listed the following canals as being totally or partially complete by December of 1888: The Cross Prairie Canal, the Southport Canal, the canal connecting Lake Cypress to Lake Hatchineha, the connector between Hatchineha and Lake Kissimmee, the improvement of Tiger Creek and Rosalie Creek (called "Cow Path" in the report), improvements in the Kissimmee River itself, the canal between Lake Okeechobee and Hiepochee, the Hiepochee to Lake Flirt canal, and the canal from Lake Hiepochee southward into the Everglades. Also included in this report is the additional canal into the upper Caloosahatchee River and some



improvements in this river's channel. Finally, there is the widening of the Southport canal to a width of 106 feet.<sup>46</sup> There is ample evidence that, in addition to lowering the levels of Lakes Tohopekaliga, East Lake Tohopekaliga, Lake Cypress and some of the smaller lakes to the east of this group, that the level of Lake Hatchineha was reduced. Enough of this lake was lowered to expose an area known as Live Oak Island, on the northeastern shore of the lake, approximately 182 acres in area, not counting the marsh.<sup>47</sup>

In 1893, as required by law, the Trustees issued another "Official Report ... To the Legislature of Florida Relative to the Drainage Operations of the Atlantic and Gulf Coast and Okeechobee Land Company." This report noted that, up to 1893, the company had been conveyed 1,174,943.06 acres of land. It stated that the canals mentioned in Kremer's 1889 report had been deepened and snagged, thus facilitating more outflow of water from the land. This report also recognized the newer canals in the northern area to Lake Hart and from that waterbody to the Econlochatchee River. Finally, it claimed that the level of the great Lake Okeechobee had been lowered four and one half feet below its normal level at the time the contract was entered into. All in all, the report was very favorable to the company's interest and promised little trouble in the future deeding of lands under the old drainage contract.<sup>48</sup>

As for the settlement portion of Disston's work in Florida, one has only to look at the map around the drainage contract to see the towns of Narcoosee, Runnymede, St. Cloud, Southport and the city of Kissimmee to note the growth of this area. However, less publicized, though just as important, was the development of Tarpon Springs, Gulfport, Anclote, and other cities in modern Pinellas

County to see an even greater effect on the growth of Florida. The main impetus to the growth of this vital area was through the Lake Butler Villa Company, another of the many Disston land companies. According to Gertrude K. Stoughton's *Tarpon Springs, Florida: The Early Years*, Disston and former Arizona governor, Anson P. K. Safford, were looking for a place from which to make a resort. James Hope, son of Anclote pioneer and U. S. Deputy Surveyor, Sam Hope, acted as their guide. Upon reaching Spring Bayou, the two immediately agreed that they had found their spot. So thinking, the Florida Land and Improvement Company was assigned title to about 70,000 acres of land in the vicinity. This company soon transferred most of it to the Lake Butler Villa Company, of which Safford was the president. Disston also had agents looking further down the Pinellas peninsula for additional opportunities. They settled upon the land that soon would be called "Disston City", today's Gulfport. Tarpon Springs flourished under the guidance of Safford and Mathew R. Marks, another experienced real estate man, who made a name for himself in Orange County before migrating west. Disston City, on the other hand, suffered greatly when Demens ended the Oranole Belt Railway in St. Petersburg, named for the Russian's home town.<sup>49</sup> Thus, two very important areas in the State of Florida owe their very existence to the efforts of Hamilton Disston.

Also owing much to the Disston heritage is the Florida sugar industry. Although some sugar has almost always been grown in Florida since Spanish times, Disston's experiments in St. Cloud and the surrounding area proved the potential for the exploitation of the land for the growth of sugar. Rice was also experimented with in this vicinity. A separate company was founded to exploit this crop's potential also,



but it was fairly short-lived compared to sugar.<sup>50</sup> Like other Floridians, he experimented in a variety of crops, including oranges and tobacco.<sup>51</sup> This latter would seem to be a natural product for the heavy cigar smoking Disston. His drainage idea inspired many to do the same with their lands and helped to bring about a whole new way of looking at swamp lands.

Little more needs to be said about his immigration schemes. He was successful in helping to bring a number of English settlers to Central Florida, where their heritage lives on today. He also brought in Italian laborers to work on the dredges in the early years of the drainage project. At one point, as a humanitarian gesture, he offered forty acres of land to each of fifty Jewish families displaced by the recent Russian pogroms who were stranded in Philadelphia.<sup>52</sup> The exact number of immigrants he brought to Florida is impossible to guess, but it was substantial.

Hamilton Disston was a complex man, like any of us. However, there has been a persistent story that needs further examination, and that is the alleged suicide of this active and vital man. The main sources of the story, and there are only two cited, are; one, the Democratic newspaper of Philadelphia, and; two, the oral testimony of a nephew who barely knew "uncle Ham", but stated that it was the family secret. Upon examination, one should remember the times in which this newspaper story was written was the age of "yellow journalism", William Randolph Hearst, Joseph Pulitzer and others. Remember, also, that Hamilton Disston was a large and regular contributor to the Republican Party, who also had, at times, some political ambitions of his own. Additionally, we should not forget that he was close to Matt Quay of Pennsylvania. The hated Republican "Boss" of the United

States Senate. The nephew's statement can be seen, in some circles, as hearsay. The alleged cause of the suicide was the supposed losses by the Disston firm during the Panic of 1893-94 and the coming due of a \$1,000,000 note drawn on the family business.

The facts of the case do not lead to a conclusion of suicide, especially since there were no eye-witnesses and the coroner's official report, recognized by all, reads that he died by natural causes, probably a weakened heart, i.e. a heart-attack. The "Father of Business History", Alfred Chandler, in his book on *Land Titles and Fraud*, noted, on page 493, that he was acquainted with Hamilton Disston and that he died of a heart-attack, while at home. If the obituary in the May 1, 1896, edition of the *Florida Times-Union* is typical, the newspapers reported that, "Heart disease was the supposed cause of his death." How could only one newspaper get the story right, when a coroner, a friend and all of the other newspaper organizations in the country reported his death incorrectly?

What of the charge of near bankruptcy caused by the Panic of 1893-94? Yes, the Disston works did reduce wages by 10 per cent during the middle of the panic, however, the company was on sound enough ground that by May 23, 1895, they had restored the lost percentage and the firm's business had increased 12 percent from 53 April of 1894 to April of 1895.<sup>53</sup> On April 4, 1896, the Disston firm announced in *The New York Times*: "Value of annual product, \$2,500,000. Our foreign trade is 20 per cent of our total business. Our output is 20 per cent greater than six years ago." This would hardly put a business out of commission.

Finally, there is the will of Hamilton Disston. This document, as recorded in *The*

*New York Times* of May 9, 1896, stated that: "In the petition filed by the executors the value of the estate is given as 'over \$100,000,' but it is thought that it will amount to several million dollars when the heavy insurance Mr. Disston carried is included." The "income" from the will and its enjoyment was to go to all the children, until his son reached his thirtieth year, when he could then take his full one-third share. His wife was to get most of the material goods (house, horses, carriages, etc.) and enjoy all of the other income until her demise, when it would become residuary estate. Fully one-third of the real estate, except that in Florida, was to go to the wife during her natural lifetime. This is not a document of a poor, destitute man, driven to the brink and beyond by a \$1,000,000 note due on his investments. It is interesting to observe that his Florida holdings are excluded from his personal will. The answer why this is so can be no simpler than the fact that corporations, under law, are treated as separate, corporal bodies, with lives of their own. With Disston's friends in the financial and political worlds, there are questions to be raised as to whether or not he could have won an extension, refinancing, etc. of this note, e.g. one of his business associates was Edward T. Stokesbury, a later partner in the "House of Morgan".

The entire scenario of a financially distraught, no place to turn man bent on suicide simply does not fit the available evidence at this time. The newspaper account of the suicide in a bathtub, is much too melodramatic. The whole repetition of the story smacks of another "Seward's Folly" myth of American history.

In summation, Florida lost a good friend when Hamilton Disston passed from this world. This was recognized by his contemporaries. In its editorial for May 1, 1896,

the day after Disston died, the *Florida Times-Union*, stated: "Floridians will read the news of the sudden death of Hamilton Disston with a feeling of genuine regret. He did wonders for the advancement of Florida's interests and the development of her products. He can be classed as one of Florida's best friends." Kissimmee, St. Cloud, Narcoosee, Tarpon Springs, Gulfport, Runnymede, Fort Myers, LaBelle, Moore Haven, etc. all owe a debt of gratitude to Hamilton Disston. The great attempt to rescue Florida from the swamps, mosquitoes and alligators, and make it a showcase of civilization is the legacy of Disston's Florida efforts. Without his leading the way, how long would the State have to await one like him: Flagler, Chipley,

Plant, all followed his lead and made their own marks upon the landscape. There may be those who chide these remarks and look at the environmental damage done by his and succeeding generations, however, they take the man out of his time, and thrust upon him a knowledge he did not have nor have a chance to acquire. Without him, many who now criticize would never have migrated to the Sunshine State and stayed away, wondering how anyone but the brave Seminoles could live in the land of swamps and alligators.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> See the following for accounts of Henry Disston: Herman L. Collins and Wilfred Jordan. *Philadelphia: A Story of Progress*. (New York: Lewis Historical Publishing Co., 1941), 417-18; Allen Johnson and Dumas Malone, editors. *Dictionary of American Biography*, Volume III (Cushman-Fraser). New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 19\_\_, 318-19; Harry C. Silcox. *A Place to Live and Work: The Henry Disston Saw Works and the Tacony Community of Philadelphia*. (University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994); and William D. Disston, Henry Disston and William Smith. "The Disston History." May 1920. Typescript in the Disston Papers of the Tacony Branch Library

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of the Free Library of Philadelphia. The author would like to express his sincere thanks for the assistance rendered by this library's very capable and courteous staff.

<sup>2</sup> Johnson and Malone. *Dictionary of American Biography*. 318.

<sup>3</sup> Disston History. 17.

<sup>4</sup> Silcox. *A Place to Live and Work*. 54-55.

<sup>5</sup> Disston History. 18.

<sup>6</sup> Silcox. 55. Samuel W. Pennypacker, in his *The Autobiography of a Pennsylvanian*, (Philadelphia: John C. Winston Co., 1918.) noted that McManes had made his fortune in street railways. Pennypacker depicts this "thrifty, capable and vigorous Irishman" as an absolute autocrat who "tolerated no difference in opinion in the ranks." He states that McManes was the head of the Republican organization in Philadelphia during the 1870s. 176.

<sup>7</sup> Pennypacker. *Autobiography*. 174.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Silcox. *A Place to Live and Work*. 55.

<sup>10</sup> For Disston's relationship to Wharton Barker, see Pennypacker's *Autobiography*, 124; For Scott's relationship, see *Florida Dispatch*, March 13, 1888. 218; For Quay, see, Stanley P. Hirshson. *Farewell to the Bloody Shirt*. (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1968), 227-28. Hirshson also notes the ambition by Disston to make a run for the Senate in 1891. Disston was also on the board of directors for the Investment Company of Philadelphia, which was capitalized at over \$4,000,000. Also serving on this board were Craig Lippincott, John Wannamaker, Henry Hovt Jr., and Issac Clothier. [See Poor's Manual of the Railroads of the United States: 1890. (Henry V. Poor. New York: American Banknote Co., 1890), 47.]

<sup>11</sup> For his father's appearance as an elector, see, Johnson and Malone, *Dictionary of American Biography*, 319; For Hamilton's letter of June 18, 1888, J. J. Dunne to W. D. Barnes. "Old Railroad Bonds" (Drawer), no file (old box destroyed). Land Records and Title Section, Division of State Lands, Florida Department of Environmental Protection, Tallahassee, Florida. Letter is loose in the drawer at

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this time. It is on the letter-head of the "Keystone Chemical Company."

<sup>12</sup> Silcox. *A Place to Live and Work*. 54-55.

<sup>13</sup> Silcox. *A Place to Live and Work*. 55; Letterhead on letter of June 18, 1888, cited above. [Disston is listed as "Vice-President" on this letterhead.]; and Pennypacker. *Autobiography*. 125.

<sup>14</sup> Disston History. 63, 72-73.

<sup>15</sup> Collins and Jordan. *Philadelphia*. 418.

<sup>16</sup> Silcox. *A Place to Live and Work*. 56.

<sup>17</sup> Edward C. Williamson. *Florida Politics in the Gilded Age: 1877-1893*. (Gainesville: University Presses of Florida, 1976), 73.

<sup>18</sup> T. Frederick Davis. "The Disston Land Purchase." *Florida Historical Quarterly*. 17(January 1939): 203-06. This short piece is still the best and simplest way to understand the Disston Drainage Contract and the Disston Purchase. Davis is emphatic about the two separate arrangements; with good cause.

<sup>19</sup> The original language of the contract stated Township 23, but this was amended later. The Peace River is what was meant, but, looking at today's map, one finds Peace Creek (the original language) is a small stream, running east to west near Bartow, and flowing into Peace River, which is the current name of the waterbody meant by the contract.

<sup>20</sup> Davis. "Disston Land Purchase", 205-06.

<sup>21</sup> *The New York Times*. February 18, 1881.

<sup>22</sup> Minutes of the Board of Trustees of the Internal Improvement Trust Fund of the State of Florida, Volume 2. Tallahassee: I. B. Hilson, 1904. 500-01. [Hereafter, Trustees Minutes, Vol. #, Page #]

<sup>23</sup> *The New York Times*. June 17, 1881.

<sup>24</sup> Kenneth R. Johnson. "The Administration of Governor William Dunnington Bloxham, 1881-1885." Masters Thesis, Florida State University, Tallahassee, Florida. August 1959.58.

<sup>25</sup> Davis. "The Disston Land Purchase." 207-08.

<sup>26</sup> Letter of December 18, 1881. Disston to Trustees. Brown Rectangular Filing Box, "Disston", Land Records and Title Section, Division of State Lands, Florida Department of Environmental Protection, Tallahassee, Florida. [Hereafter, "Brown Box. Disston"] According to the *Florida Daily Times*, of December 23, 1881, the negotiations took place in New York during a series of "frequent interviews." Reed, for purposes of biographical background, was a member of Parliament, a noted civil engineer, a naval architect and consulting engineer for both the Russian and Japanese navies (ironically) and the chairman of the Milford Dry Docks.

<sup>27</sup> Trustees Minutes. Vol. 3. 199-200.

<sup>28</sup> Brown Box. "Disston." Letter of January 17, 1882. Reed to Bloxham.

<sup>29</sup> Davis. "The Disston Land Purchase." 208.

<sup>30</sup> Williamson. *Florida Politics in the Gilded Age*. 75.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. 76

<sup>32</sup> Johnson. "The Administration of William Dunnington Bloxham." 60.

<sup>33</sup> Brown Box. "Disston." Letter of October 3, 1881. Salinger to Judge E. F. Dunne.

<sup>34</sup> Brown Box. "Disston." Letter of December 18, 1881. Disston to Trustees, previously cited. This file also contains handwritten copies of the agreements with the two railroads.

<sup>35</sup> Florida Department of State, Division of Library and Information Services, Bureau of Archives and Records Management. Record Group 593, Series 665, Carton 1. Letter of April 14, 1884, Chipley to Bloxham.

<sup>36</sup> Albert Parry. *Full Steam Ahead: The Story of Peter Demens, Founder of St. Petersburg, Florida*. (St. Petersburg: Great Outdoors Publishing Co., 1987), 13-16. Also see letter of support, dated December 29, 1886. Disston to Governor E. A. Perry. "Old Railroad Bonds ..." [Drawer] Loose, file box destroyed. Land Records and Title Section ...

<sup>37</sup> Old Railroad Bonds ... [Drawer], "Atlantic and Gulf Coast and Okeechobee Land Company" [File].

Letter of June 8, 1888. Disston to Governor E. A. Perry. Land Records and Title Section ...

<sup>38</sup> Brown Box. "Disston". Letter of October 18, 1881. 1. Coryell to Governor W. D. Bloxham.

<sup>39</sup> *Tallahassee Floridian*. June 28, 1881. 2.

<sup>40</sup> *Florida Daily Times*. February 23, 1882. 3.

<sup>41</sup> Elizabeth Cantrell. *When Kissimmee Was Young*. (Kissimmee: Self Published, 1948), 25. According to Pat Dobson's research, which is confirmed by the notice in the Minutes of the Trustees of the Internal Improvement Fund, this canal was actually dug in 1884, one year after the Southport canal. Ms. Cantrell's dating is, therefore, slightly inaccurate in this instance. The author would like to thank Leigh Camp, of St. Cloud, Florida, for finding this contradiction in the sources herein cited.

<sup>42</sup> This is a quick summarization of Pat Dodson's article, "Hamilton Disston's St. Cloud Sugar Plantation, 1887-1901." *Florida Historical Quarterly* 49 (April 1971): 357-369.

<sup>43</sup> Florida State Archives. Record Group 593, Series 665, Carton 1. Letter of December 4, 1885. Daniel to Perry.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid. Letter of March 23, 1886. Daniel to Perry.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid. Folder 2. Letter of June 19, 1886. Disston to John A. Henderson.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid. Letter of March 5, 1889. Kreamer to Fleming.

<sup>47</sup> See a series of letters in Volumes 20-22 in the Miscellaneous Letters to Surveyor General. Land Records and Title Section ... For the acreages involved here, see the Official Plat of Township 28 South, Range 29 East, surveyed by William H. Macy, January 16, 1897.

<sup>48</sup> "Official Report of the Board of Trustees of the Internal Improvement Trust Fund to the Legislature of Florida Relative to the Drainage Operations of the Atlantic and Gulf Coast Canal and Okeechobee Land Company, 1893." Tallahassee: Tallahassee Book and Job Office, 1893. It is worth noting that the lowering of the Lake Okeechobee by four and one half feet, via this operation, would be greatly

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disputed today, as it was in the years immediately preceding Governor Broward's great effort.

<sup>49</sup> See, Gertrude K. Stoughton. *Tarpon Springs, Florida: The Early Years*. (Tarpon Springs: Tarpon Springs Area Historical Society, 1975, Second Edition), and Parry. *Full Steam Ahead*. 23-24.

<sup>50</sup> *The Tropical Sun*. (West Palm Beach/Juno) April 1, 1891, and June 10, 1891. It was reported in this latter article that 15,000 acres was rented for four years at a rent of \$600,000. The firm was known as the Kissimmee Rice Manufacturing Company.

<sup>51</sup> *Florida Times-Union*, January 21, 1886. Reported that Disston had 56,000 young orange trees planted in a grove on East Lake Tohopekaliga. For the Tobacco story, see *Florida Times-Union*. December 4, 1895.

<sup>52</sup> *South Florida Journal*. March 9, 1882. He wrote the offer in an open letter to Mayor King.

<sup>53</sup> *The New York Times*. May 23, 1895. 1.