FROM TABLE TO TRASH:
THE RISE AND FALL OF MULLET FISHING IN SOUTHWEST FLORIDA

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To the memory of
Grady “Bud” Albury
December 4, 1927—July 1, 2012
“Please believe me: you’ve got to know the layout of the situation
before you start anything.”

Image: Mullet. From the Shell Fish Division, Florida State Department of Agriculture,
Third Biennial Report, For the Years 1917 and 1918 (Tallahassee: T. J. Appleyard), n.p.
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ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores the social history and cultural meanings associated with mullet (*Mugil cephalus*), a common inshore fish, in southwest Florida from the early nineteenth century to the late twentieth century. Centuries of harvesting, trading, and eating mullet allowed diverse populations of people to adapt to a challenging environment, generating a commonweal that connected common folk—harvesters and consumers—to the state’s inshore waters. Systems of production and social relations based on the low-cost fish contributed to place-based notions of identity and collective allegiance to inshore waterways dedicated to provision rather than proceeds. As Americanization of the region progressed, conflicts widened between environmentally situated modes of life in the region and imperial abstractions of the terrain designed to render its inhabitants—human and otherwise—into resources capable of fueling capitalist growth. During the twentieth century, mullet widely came to be considered a “trash” fish, of little value as a food and expendable as a commodity. This downward shift in social status corresponded with the rising economic and political stature of Florida’s seascapes as sites of leisure production. Promoted through conservation rhetoric, a successful 1994 citizens’ ballot initiative banned statewide use of gill nets, the primary mullet-harvesting gear, a move that confirmed the success of instrumentalist logic that correlated social worth with capitalist potential.

Analysis of the history and symbolic significance of mullet production and consumption provides insight into the power relations that shape the ecological, economic, and political structure of waterways as social domains. This dissertation argues that the classification of mullet and the people associated with it as species of
American “trash” grew out of longstanding efforts by federal and state officials to integrate Florida into the cultural boundaries of the nation, which eventually placed an accessible, food-producing seascape outside the rubric of the public good. Mullet-dependent people’s defense of the species as a commodity, alongside their opposition to the commoditization of the seascape as a playground, offers valuable critiques of the social injustices and class bias that infuse contemporary rhetoric and practices regarding sustainability and conservation.
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Mullet did not enter my life until years later, but since childhood I have been attracted to its environs, the shifting space where *terra firma* and salt water overlap. Within the metropolitan sprawl of the Long Island Sound watershed, my imagination was captured by the marsh grasses lining the space between the railroad tracks and the Quinnipiac River, the tide pools at Lighthouse Park, the windrows of seaweed along Hammonassett Beach. Living on the “fifty-cent” side of a Connecticut town just north of New Haven, my white, middle class family did not frequent yacht clubs or private beaches the way families from the “dollar bill” part of town did. But on several summers, my family stayed for a week or two in a small, rental house on Cape Cod, enjoying access to bay, ocean, and woods for the length of my father’s annual vacation. I loved the sea, the mud and grass of tidal rivers, the smell of salt, the animal movement of wind. As a young teen, many mornings on the Cape found me rising in the early dark, walking the mile to the beach, and watching the sun rise. It was the sense of being on the edge of our blue-green planet that drew me.

As an undergraduate at the University of North Carolina, Asheville, I majored in Literature and found, much to my surprise, that I enjoyed the Intro Biology classes I had to take. This led me to seek out a summer job doing biological fieldwork. For the next several years, I worked as a researcher and, eventually, a trainer, on sea turtle population studies. Entering the southeastern low country for the first time felt like a primal homecoming. On the beaches of Little Cumberland and Cumberland Islands in Georgia and Antigua, in the West Indies, I and other team members walked the shoreline night after night, watching for female loggerhead and hawksbill sea turtles to emerge from the dark sea, haul the several hundred pounds of their bodies across the strand, dig a nest at the base of dunes or under the tangle of sea grape trees, lay and carefully bury a clutch of one hundred or so eggs, turn back to the water, and return to the sea. The work involved fixing a tag to a front flipper, measuring the carapace, and recording various other data points. The wonder involved coming to understand these animals, evolutionarily ancient and indifferent to humans, well enough to accommodate to their rhythms; watching the laborious effects of gravity on their bodies on land, and the grace of their movements at
Sea; and the privilege of becoming utterly at ease with the nighttime world of unpeopled shoreline spaces.

Sea turtle work eventually taught me to pay attention to people who cross the threshold between land and sea in their working lives and daily existence. During the years that followed these seasons of fieldwork, I grew increasingly interested in the complicated interactions between people and marine creatures and spaces: scientific, aesthetic, spiritual, commercial, and recreational engagements and the messy intersections between them. This led to interdisciplinary fieldwork in a Haitian fishery for a master’s degree; to work as a researcher for a University of Florida sociological study of Florida fishing families; to interviews, in-depth oral history work, and archival studies with commercial fishing folk, fishery researchers, and conservationists in the southeastern United States as an independent scholar. Through this research I came to realize that there is a sophisticated level of understanding, intimacy, and emotional connection to ecological systems experienced by many people who know nature through their labor—as Richard White puts it—but that is little recognized or appreciated in the conservation world. People who fish for a living, I found, generally develop understandings of the rhythms of saltwater spaces far greater than anything I will ever know.

I moved to Tampa in 1993, in the midst of a campaign to gather enough signatures to place a constitutional amendment banning gill nets on the ballot the following year. Before and after the passage of the ban, two responses seemed most common: first, that the necessity for banning gill nets was self-evident and that positive results were almost immediately apparent; and second, that negative consequences from banning the nets, if any, were negligible. The primary downsides to outlawing gill nets—the displacement of commercial fishing families and the reduced availability and increased expense of mullet in the marketplace—largely were represented as unfortunate but unavoidable, or as inconsequential. These attitudes appeared in print and broadcast media, in casual conversation, and in more formal settings, such as Florida’s 1997 Constitutional Revision Commission hearings. Sport fishing colleagues and acquaintances, avowed conservation activists, some biologists, and members of the public with no particular knowledge of fisheries or conservation expressed this view with
great frequency. Those who avowed other views—that gill net-fishing was not responsible for large amounts of incidental “by-catch,” that mullet populations were not in crisis, that mullet-fishing provided a good source of fresh, local food for low-income consumers—generally were fishermen and their families, and generally were portrayed as self-interested, ill-informed, and untrustworthy.

A certified “turtle-hugger,” I probably would have been motivated to support the ban, had I not had occasion to learn a bit more about gill nets in general and the specific practices within the state. Several biologists whom I knew through personal and professional associations were opposed to the “net ban” and, like me, voted against it. My then-husband, a marine biologist I had met through my sea turtle work, was one. In his view, rather than being the indiscriminate “walls of death” as portrayed by net ban proponents, gill nets were, by definition, size-selective and, depending on how they were fished, species-selective. In Florida, mullet fishermen deployed gill nets from small boats, typically crewed by one or two people, who would visually spot the schools of fish, encircle them, haul the net in, and pick the fish out. Whether regulations were needed to control seasonal or geographic uses of the gear, or whether controls on the volume of harvest were needed, were separate questions; but the gear itself, as well as its manner of deployment in the state, was, in his opinion, an environmentally reasonable way to harvest fish commercially. Another biologist acquaintance, a researcher with the Florida Fish and Wildlife Research Institute (the research arm of the state’s wildlife management agency), likewise was opposed to the net ban. When I asked why he had not spoken out or written about it at the time, he told me that employees of the agency specifically were instructed by the institution’s leadership not to take a public position on the issue. He, and his wife, also told me not to use his name.

Given that many of the biologists with whom I was acquainted had not seen a scientific justification for banning gill nets, I became interested in understanding the origins of the accepted rationale for the ballot initiative. One explicit argument rested on the idea that mullet, as an important source of food for gamefish and as an effective bait, performed a better public function by being able to reproduce within state waters, free of commercial harvest (except as bait). A corollary argument was that recreational fishing generated vastly greater amounts of revenue for the state than did commercial net fishing.
and thus was more valuable to preserve. This reasoning was framed as a conservationist argument, because catching fish by hook and line for sport was seen as inherently benign in a way that net-fishing for the market was not.

What became clear during the course of my research is that the core arguments in support of banning gill nets were the product of long-term, calculated strategies on the part of state officials and business enterprises to increase the revenue-generating capacity of Florida’s waters. Rather than the net ban itself, the historical development of this strategy over the course of American political control of the territory and the state became of interest to me. Also of interest was the contrasting view, generally expounded by commercial fishing people themselves: that marine systems and the creatures within it were primarily valuable as sources of income and marketable food for the public at large. Making money for themselves and their families was, of course, a central motivation but, as far as I could determine, without the expectation that the highest revenue possible was always the best or that increased fiscal returns correlated with increased social worth. That such perspectives tended to be viewed as self-serving justifications for wanton exploitation of marine resources, while the arguments advanced by sport-fishing advocates typically were conveyed and seemingly received as disinterested conservationist points of view, struck me as curious and questionable.

Because Florida’s inshore commercial fishing folks had become so culturally and politically subordinate by the time of the passage of the net limitation amendment and its aftermath, I thought an in-depth exploration of their understandings of the social and moral worth of the sea and its fruits would be a valuable endeavor. Mullet, so central to the marine ecosystems and the cultural universe of southwest Florida, seemed to be a useful vehicle for exploring the meanings of marine space to long-term inhabitants of this peninsular place. I did not seek to write a history of the “net ban,” though a book-length study of the topic would be well worth writing and reading. No doubt many other studies could, and perhaps should, be written, from the vantage point of individuals and groups with other kinds of investments in coastal and aquatic domains. This dissertation is merely my long overdue, and admittedly circuitous, attempt to account for the passion with which so many commercial fishing folks expressed their commitment to harvesting the humble, detritus-eating, pennies-per-pound mullet; and to provide some avenues for
understanding the depth of their outrage and disgust at having that vocation taken away in the name of the public good.
Figure 1: Map of the Gulf of Mexico region. Illustration by Eric Travers Applegarth.
Figure 2. Map of Florida. Illustration by Eric Travers Applegarth.
Figure 3. Map of the Tampa Bay area. Illustration by Eric Travers Applegarth.
Figure 4: Map of the Charlotte Harbor area. Illustration by Eric Travers Applegarth.
The south side [of the Bay of Tampa] has a little entrance for frigates. There is a great mullet fishery in it, which they fish for with nets as in Spain.  
Juan López de Velasco, *Geografía y Descripción Universal de las Indias*, 1575

The roes of mullets and black drums are put into a pickle for about a quarter of an hour, then taken out and partially dried in the sun, then pressed between two boards; afterwards exposed upon a hurdle in a small hut to the smoak of the inner part of the ears of corn…These roes the Spaniards are very fond of, and use them instead of cavear.  
Bernard Romans, *A Concise Natural History of East and West Florida*, 1776

During the fall they move in such immense schools that the noise of their splashing in the water resembles distant thunder and to persons living near the river or bay, their noise, kept up day and night, becomes very annoying. These schools are followed by large numbers of sharks, porpoises, and other destructive fishes, as well as pelicans and like sea-birds, all of which eat of the Mullet until they can eat no more.  

I never saw such a pisciverous country. It must be so, for there is nothing else to eat.  
A god-forsaken country, notwithstanding its orange trees.  
Barnet Phillips, letter to Secretary of the Smithsonian Spencer F. Baird, Charlotte Harbor, Florida, January 31, 1884

Almost any man, if he desires, can equip himself with suitable and sufficient gear to successfully take mullet. The consumer, be he ever so poor, if he is able to procure flesh of any kind for food, can buy mullet; they are both the cheapest fish, and the most widely distributed, both in our waters and in our southeastern markets.  
Josiah Asakiah Williams, *Third Biennial Report of the Florida Shell Fish Commission, 1917-1918*

Mullet is all you need.  
Alfonso Darna, Charlotte Harbor commercial fisherman, 1990
INTRODUCTION
A COMMON FISH AND THE COMMONWEAL

A region dominated by estuaries, marshland, and mangrove islands and coastlines, southwest Florida’s inshore waters provide prime habitat for a bottom-feeding fish called mullet (\textit{Mugil cephalus}). Prey for marine mammals, carnivorous fish, and seabirds; foundation of regional ecosystems, fisheries, and societies; sustenance for indigenous people and colonists, for the epicure and the worker: mullet is among the fruits of the sea and land that has allowed people to adapt themselves to Florida without significant physical transformations of the space. The familiarity of catching, cooking, and consuming this species was part of a distinct regional cuisine and was a signal of a manner of life, an \textit{in situ} accommodation to a specific environment. Through its commonplace status, the fish sustained an adaptive cultural world that existed contrary to the social hierarchies and ceaseless drive towards modernization that animated Americanization of the peninsular territory. This dissertation explores the arc in the cultural life of mullet in southwest Florida from the early nineteenth century to the late twentieth century as its status shifted from being an essential regional staple of the table to being widely considered a “trash” fish, of little value as a food and expendable as a commodity. Losing the ubiquity of mullet as a food meant losing a longstanding link between the common waters and the common people of the region.

The premise of this project is that analysis of the historical details and symbolic meanings of harvesting and eating mullet in Florida provides insight into collective understandings of the seascape as a social domain. Although it is contiguous with the \textit{terra firma} realm where most of us spend most of our lives, the seascape may appear to exist as a distant realm, distinct from daily life. As the intimate relationships between mullet and mullet-fishing people in southwest Florida illustrate, however, the marine environment is a “space of society.”\textsuperscript{1} By analyzing the meanings of mullet as they have changed through time, I seek to understand the power relations that have shaped decisions and conflicts about the proper ecological and social configuration of the seascape.

Simultaneously a biological creature and a commodity, mullet provides a path for investigating the reciprocal networks between people, other animals, and biogeographic elements through which distinct landscapes are formed. Although it is a wild species, mullet’s abundance and accessibility places it on the border of domesticity. Capable of tolerating a range of salinities, it is a loosely catadromous species, living mostly in inshore, shallow-water habitats and spawning offshore. Unlike anadromous species like salmon and shad, which spawn inshore but mostly live offshore, mullet tends to be dependably available, helping successive populations of people survive an environment that many would-be settlers have found impenetrable and uninhabitable. Centuries of harvesting, trading, and eating mullet have provided an occupational and culinary foundation in the southeastern United States. Labor practices, household structures, and civic interactions based on mullet also contributed to communal identities and particularized notions of belonging to the place, the region, and the country as a physical and social space. This study explores tensions between the itinerant, lived history of the region and imperial abstractions of the terrain designed to render its inhabitants—human and otherwise—into resources capable of fueling capitalist growth.

From Spanish colonization of Florida in the sixteenth century through the nineteenth century Americanization of the region and the demographic explosions of the twentieth century, the social relations through which mullet has been produced as a food and commodity provide an example of the “art of being in between.”2 Developed through the dynamics of colonialism and the expansion of the nation-state, southwest Florida’s mullet fisheries nevertheless existed on the margins of the transnational capitalist order. Trading circuits within which the species was enmeshed linked the region to people and economies throughout the Gulf of Mexico, the Caribbean, the Bahamas, and southeastern North America, rather than northeastern metropolitan centers. Through the nineteenth century, the diverse array of people who inhabited Florida relied on the region’s waterways for food, income, transportation, and refuge, depending on mullet as a key survival food. Prior to the Civil War, the fish fed enslaved, slave-holding, and self-emancipated people alike. Subsequently, the species earned fishermen pennies a pound;

was widely consumed by working class, poor, and rural people; and was popular among African Americans throughout the southeastern United States. Well into the twentieth century, harvesting and marketing mullet tended to require a mobile and flexible use of space based on extended family labor, with minimal exchanges of cash.³

If cod, as Mark Kurlansky has written, is the fish that changed the world, mullet is a fish that afforded accommodation. Within the large-volume, deep-water fisheries of northeastern North America, the use of highly capitalized fishing gears, processing facilities, and distribution networks allowed the region’s “codfish aristocracy” to amass wealth and political power, thereby transforming the social structure of the region. Such trends ultimately led to dramatic crashes in North Atlantic cod populations.⁴ Operated through the use of small boats and technologically simple gear, the main outcome of southwest Florida’s mullet fisheries, on the other hand, has been to feed people within the northern Caribbean and the southeastern United States. While centuries of mullet-fishing resulted in lower populations of the species than would have existed in the absence of fishing pressure, mullet stocks never experienced the profound depletions common to more industrialized fisheries. As the low-cost, “bread and butter” species of Florida’s commercial fishing industry, mullet and the inshore ecosystems it inhabits functioned as a commonweal, reliably accessible to producers and consumers alike. The economic circuits within which mullet circulated crossed national boundaries and fostered ethnically mixed, itinerant cultures that did not conform to American dreams of technological progress, efficiency, and cohesion. In the process of feeding people over


the course of centuries, mullet generated collective allegiance to inshore waterways dedicated to provision rather than proceeds.

This dissertation uses the cultural life of mullet mullet as a means to explore historical conflicts between the dominant values of the nation and a social system that existed in the capitalist borderlands. As the American life of mullet in southwest Florida proceeded, state and federal governing institutions repeatedly attempted, and failed, to integrate the fish into centralized networks of production and consumption. Treating capitalist development as the basis for national identity and worth, scientific, political, and economic leaders through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries represented mullet and its cultural surround as backward and substandard. Florida’s seascape as a site of leisure production generated far greater wealth than the mullet fisheries, ultimately becoming more useful to the state and the nation than the production of an everyday food for the common people of the region.

By the late twentieth century, a successful citizens’ ballot initiative to ban the use of gill nets in inshore waters, which greatly curtailed the state’s commercial mullet fishery, confirmed the success of such logic. Promoted through conservation rhetoric, the 1994 ballot initiative also illustrated the broad acceptance among the body politic of the notion that commercial fishing and common-use rights to aquatic spaces are incompatible with environmental health. Although Florida’s ban on gill nets designated mullet expendable as a commodity, traditions of harvesting and eating the species continued, as did strong attachments to the failsafe maritime-commons represented by this “bread and butter” fish.

As examined in this dissertation, mullet-fishing people in southwest Florida have embodied modes of life deeply situated within the environmental contours and social history of the region. The place-based notions of identity and rootedness they developed in the process existed in tension with centralized notions of American citizenship. I argue that the widespread late twentieth-century classification of mullet and the people associated with it as species of American “trash” grew out of longstanding efforts by federal and state officials to integrate Florida into the cultural boundaries of the nation, which eventually placed mullet production and a food-producing seascape outside the rubric of the public good. The fall of commercial mullet fishing in Florida widely is
viewed as a triumph for conservation and a path toward sustainable production of local seafood. This dissertation maintains, instead, that mullet production and consumption were displaced from the public sphere because they were incompatible with the growth of a highly capitalized, leisure-oriented seascape. Mullet-dependent people’s defense of the species as a commodity, alongside their opposition to the commoditization of the seascape as a playground, thus offers valuable critiques of the social injustices and class bias that infuse contemporary rhetoric and practices regarding sustainability and conservation.

**Theoretical Grounding**

This dissertation provides an example of how ideological expectations are embedded in social practices and policies regarding the use of natural resources. As discussed in such diverse fields as environmental history, cultural geography, and material culture studies, people are “ecological actors,” whose interactions with the natural world are influenced by subjective identities and social standing. The reciprocal dynamics between human and non-human beings and forces generate ongoing cultural, political, economic, and environmental transformations. “Artifacts rearrange nature to embody values,” notes Henry Glassie, for example, while Carolyn Merchant argues that the European colonization of North America was driven by the ideological commitment to impose “order upon the land.” The construction of a deep history of a specific “bioregion”—with attention to the human alterations, adaptations, and expectations that have shaped it through time—requires an understanding of the physical and biological properties of the terrestrial or aquatic systems in question. As emphasized by Donald Worster, a founding scholar of the discipline, environmental histories should never “lose sight of the land itself, of its moral and material significance, its agency and influence; the land must stand at the core of the new history.” This analysis of the social history of southwest Florida and its mullet fisheries thus calls for attention to the spatial and ecological properties of the place as well as its human-mediated dimensions.5

In Florida, the landform is defined by water. Contiguous with an extensive offshore platform, the terrain was “born from water” in a geological sense. On the Gulf of Mexico side, the extent of the underwater platform is roughly equal to the area of the exposed land of the state. Starting about one hundred eighty million years ago, accretions of carbonate rock created the Florida Plateau, but the terra firma portion only emerged when sea levels receded during the last period of glaciation, about eighteen thousand years ago. The carbonate base of the landform, penetrated by cavities of various dimension, accounts for the numerous springs and lakes throughout the state, while the extremely low elevation, flat terrain, and lack of surface drainage contribute to the extensiveness of freshwater wetlands. Along the western shoreline, a gently sloping shelf with a floor of muddy sediment limits the extent of sandy beaches and enhances the range of marsh and mangrove coastal systems. The ability of people to adapt to or technologically overcome this water-dominated space has exerted enormous influence over the region’s demographic and cultural dynamics.\(^6\) As the terrain itself has been formed in relation with the water, so have its people.

Within the inshore marine environment of Florida’s Gulf Coast, especially along the southwestern shorelines, striped or black mullet is a key species. Mullet is a prolific inhabitant of the brackish biomes where fresh water mixes with salt, where land merges with sea, where detritus-rich mangrove swamps and seagrass beds support the lives of myriad animals and plants. Feeding on detritus, microalgae and zooplankton, and

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becoming wholly herbivorous past the juvenile stage, the fish is highly abundant, reproducing in much greater numbers than carnivorous fish species. As a primary consumer, mullet acts as a transfer mechanism, making the energy produced from the sun by plant life available to other organisms. Unlike other species that occupy the same tropic level, such as killifish, mollies, and gobies, *M. cephalus* is a relatively large fish, reaching maturity in the third to fourth year of life at approximately one foot in length and over one pound in weight. Because of these characteristics, inshore regions that support large populations of mullet also support large populations of carnivores: other fish, marine mammals, seabirds, and people alike.\(^7\)

If mullet is a biological transfer mechanism between energy produced by the sun and other animal consumers of such energy, commercial fishing institutions function as social transmission systems. Several elements combine to form a commercial fishery: people use experience, knowledge, and technology to interact with aquatic ecosystems, harvest various organisms, and engage in trading circuits, ultimately transforming natural creatures into commodities to be purchased by consumers.\(^8\) Because mullet is an


\(^8\) See, for example, Arthur McEvoy’s definition of a fishery as “an ecological system: a flow of energy and material through a network that encompasses not only environment, fish, and fishers, but also the market channels through which the nutrients stored in the
herbivorous, schooling species, nets rather than baited hooks and lines are the most efficient means to harvest the fish. Having ruled southwest Florida from about the sixth until the early eighteenth century, the indigenous Calusa people were a sophisticated, sedentary society based on fisheries rather than agriculture. As one team of archaeologists put it, “Nets were the foundation of Calusa success”: investigations of Calusa sites have uncovered fragments of gill-net, net-mesh gauges, and net floats and weights dating from over one thousand years ago, all similar in style to twentieth-century gear. Over the centuries in southwest Florida, in order to harvest mullet people have used individually hand-thrown cast nets; haul seines operated from shore by crews of up to a dozen; stop-nets to trap fish up an inlet on a falling tide; and gill nets deployed from boats typically under twenty-five feet in length, usually operated by crews of one or two. For Florida mullet’s career as a food fish, biology has been destiny to some extent. The species’ richness in highly unsaturated fatty acids makes it a healthy and “toothsome” fish to eat, comparable in flavor to salmon or mackerel. Enormous quantities of the species were harvested in single fishing expeditions, especially in the late fall and early winter months when the fish, signaled by passing cold fronts, gather in large

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schools to move en masse to the deeper waters where they spawn. Such attributes—oiliness, combined with large quantities obtained in a short time span—have made mullet a difficult fish to preserve, particularly prior to the widespread availability of ice. Until the late nineteenth-century, Florida mullet generally was salted and kept in barrels, with varying levels of quality in the preservation methods. Because of the challenges of retaining freshness and flavor for long periods, the fish as a commodity circulated within circumscribed regions. Before the 1821 U.S. possession of Florida, markets for mullet primarily were within the state and southward to Cuba; after Americanization, and in particular after the Civil War, markets for mullet harvested in the state shifted northward, centered largely on distribution in Florida and throughout the southeastern United States, where it was the “most generally popular” fish. The species always was the lowest cost and highest volume commercial food fish produced in the state, until the late twentieth century, when federal and state officials encouraged the development of a lucrative export market for the roe. Subsequently, the 1994 ballot initiative that banned gill nets in state waters greatly reduced the overall volume of harvest.¹⁰

Florida mullet fishermen, like their counterparts in fisheries and other extractive industries throughout the world, come to know nature through the “bodily knowledge” achieved by labor. Repetitive, work-based interactions with the seasonal cycles of the fish they target are fundamental to the development of understandings and expectations regarding marine ecosystems.¹¹ Because mullet are visually adept, Florida fishermen


¹¹ According to Richard White, a central intellectual and political problem with contemporary environmentalist thought is the failure to recognize that people often come
have learned that they are best harvested on a commercial basis with gill or other entangling nets rather than seines, which they can see and jump over. Whether constructed out of natural fibers (cabbage palm, cotton, or flax) or nylon and monofilament, gill nets function in the same way: particular mesh opening dimensions are used at various times of the year in order to target desired sizes and species of fish. Smaller fish pass through the mesh unharmed, desired sizes are caught by their gills, and larger fish bounce off the net. In Florida’s mullet fisheries, gill nets generally were actively tended: fishermen visually spotted the schools of fish, encircled them with the net deployed from the stern of the boat, and “corkscrewed” or “compassed” the net into tight circles before hauling it in and extracting the fish from the meshes. Since mullet generally has been an abundant but low-cost species, such practices tended to yield Florida fishermen and consumers a dependable supply of the fish, without generating a great deal of wealth.

Through time, I argue in this dissertation, what the relatively steady system of producing and distributing mullet did generate were boundaries of collective identity and to know nature “through labor.” Richard White, *The Organic Machine: The Remaking of the Columbia River* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995), x. White also points out that labor conveys both bodily and social knowledge: “Working communicates a history of past work; this history is turned into a bodily practice until it seems but second nature. This habitus, this bodily knowledge, is unconsciously observed, imitated, adopted, and passed on in a given community. Our work in nature both reinforces and modifies it,” he states, in “‘Are You an Environmentalist or Do You Work for a Living?’: Work and Nature” in *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, ed. William Cronon (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996), 179. James O’Connor similarly states that a central premise of environmental history is that labor serves “as the mediation between culture and nature.” James O’Connor, “What is Environmental History? Why Environmental History?” *Capitalism, Nature, Socialism* 8 (June 1997): 9.

Rather than catching fish within the mesh by the gills, haul seines generally have smaller mesh and catch fish by confining them within a sweep of webbing. The particular suitability for gill nets in harvesting mullet is from Brent Winner, Associate Research Scientist (Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, Fish and Wildlife Research Institute, Fisheries Independent Monitoring Program), discussion with the author, April 26, 2006: “Mullet are really visual. It is very difficult to catch mullet with a seine net, as they typically see the seine mesh and jump over the net. Mullet are best harvested using a gill and/or entangling net.” For descriptions of gill-netting for mullet see, for example, Lampl, “Feeding the People.” Eacker, “Mullet, Mangoes, and Midwives.” Mike Davis, audio interview by Jack Davis, October 28, 2011, Cedar Key, Florida.
understanding. “One might say,” wrote cultural theorist Henri Lefebvre, “that practical activity writes upon nature, albeit in a scrawling hand.” Lefebvre maintained that social space should not be conceived of as a static entity or physical background, but rather as a dynamic product that arises out of dialectical relationships between the practices of daily life, social systems, and cultural representations, thus serving as a “tool of thought and of action.” Practices of harvesting, marketing, and eating mullet in southwest Florida inscribed the seascape with particular understandings of abstract concepts such as public liberty and the common good. Rooted in the soil of family and community labor, collective memories of producing and consuming mullet in Florida cohered around deeply felt attachments to a reliable relationship between fishing folks, an accessible marine environment, and the common people of the region. Within Florida’s inshore fishing communities, these “socially shared dispositions” functioned as barometers for evaluating the massive alterations of the demographic, cultural, and physical landscapes experienced by the state from the mid-twentieth century onward.13

Emotional and ideological commitments to the notion of a mullet-based commonweal are in keeping with the dynamics of maritime and terrestrial commons throughout the temporal and geographical map of North America. As historians, anthropologists, and a great many other scholars have demonstrated, rural people

13 Henri Lefebvre, The Production of Space, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1991), 117, 26. For the foundational argument that individual memories develop and are recalled within the soil of familial, religious, occupational, and other social networks, see Maurice Halbwachs, On Collective Memory, ed. and trans. Lewis A. Coser (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992). Steven Knapp, “Collective Memory and the Actual Past,” Representations 26 (Spring 1989): 123, states “…socially shared dispositions are likely to be connected with narratives preserved by collective memory…[T]he narratives preserved by collective memory sometimes play a normative role—that is, they may in various ways provide criteria, implicit or explicit, by which…particular ethical or political proposals can be authorized or criticized.” Anssi Paasi, “Place and Region: Regional Worlds and Words,” Progress in Human Geography 26 (2002): 807-808, offers another useful analysis of the relationships between experience, memory, and the construction of place: “…places can be conceptualized as cumulative archives of personal spatial experience emerging from unique webs of situated life episodes…Individual life histories and meanings are always social, since they are positioned in practices and discourses based on family, class, gender, ethnicity, generations and, more broadly, social history…Region and place become fused in inevitably contested institutional practices, discourse and memory.”
dependent on common pools of resources frequently develop, and fiercely defend, notions of customary rights of access and use, what Karl Jacoby has termed “usufruct as a valid ideology.” Opposing this on the part of governing and business institutions in the United States, beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, have been preferences toward sedentary resources and populations; private and enclosed systems of property rights; geometrically designed transportation routes; and political systems oriented toward expanding market-economies. In recent decades, instrumentalist logic often has been invoked to support the conversion of seascapes and waterfronts in many regions from commercial fishing and industrial uses to recreational and tourism-oriented commerce. Such discourse, Bonnie McCay notes, operates in tandem with the growing tendency of sport-fishing and marine conservation organizations to posit commercial fishing and access to marine commons as “unacceptable privilege[s].” To defend their access to resources, commercial fishing people generally invoke the language of customary rights and distributional equity.\(^1\) This dissertation traces the manifestations of such conflicts in Florida’s seascapes.

A final point to highlight is a basic fact that connects the biological and social attributes of mullet: “Fish move.” Commercial fishermen often emphasize this truism to explain the folly of expecting a given species to appear in an identical location year after year. Economists and property rights theorists highlight mobility when placing fish in the category of “fugitive resources,” which must be captured prior to being allocated to

individuals or groups. In addition to the physical movements dictated by their biological life histories and ecological relationships, fish that are transformed into food and commodities also circulate through human patterns of use. As an elemental source of sustenance, mullet has moved through people’s bodies to satisfy the animal hungers of daily life, but the fish also moves through cycles of symbolic meanings. The cultural, economic, and political significance of Florida mullet, and those who have relied on it, has changed through time, divergently evaluated by those within and outside of the circle of dependence. Attention to the processes through which an object moves in and out of commodity status, Igor Kopytoff has written, reveals “a moral economy that stands behind the objective economy of visible transactions.” By analyzing the dynamics of exchange through which shifting meanings have attached to Florida mullet, this dissertation examines human interactions with marine environments as arenas within which notions of citizenship, the public good, and subjective identity are developed and contested.

Methodological Approaches and Sources

Functioning as key occupational, domestic, and recreational domains, the extensive inshore waters and shorelines of Florida also have figured largely in the

15 For definition of “fugitive” resources and analysis of their relationships to the development of common property resource institutions, see for example S. V. Ciriacy-Wantrup and Richard C. Bishop, “‘Common Property’ as a Concept in Natural Resources Policy,” *Natural Resources Journal* 15 (October 1975): 724.

national imagination as emblems of the potent possibilities offered by the semi-tropical terrain. In combination and, often, in conflict, the seascapes functioned as domains for survival, producing food and income, and, through their development as places of recreation and relaxation, as realms of individual and collective transformation. This study emphasizes tensions between everyday uses of Florida’s coastal realms by ordinary people and cultural representations of these spaces as sites of investment and modernization, the development of which, it was hoped, would contribute to the national march toward civilization and perfectibility. To examine such oppositions throughout the dissertation, I investigate the discourses and practices of scientific, governing, and business institutions through which mullet and its producers and consumers were evaluated vis-à-vis other marine species, people, and industries for fitness with capitalist expectations.

Inspired by scholarship on the social meanings of everyday commodities, this dissertation constructs a “biography” of mullet harvested from Florida’s southwestern waters and distributed throughout the region. Material culture scholar Judy Attfield called for academic investigations of banal objects as sites of social meaning because, she wrote, “it is in the ordinariness of the everyday that people interact with their own particular time and place.” Following this call, I address the historical conditions within which the commonplace fish emerged as an item of exchange; the people and social structures through which it circulated; and the varying cultural engagements with the species as an ubiquitous staple, a low but steady source of income, bait for catching other species, and a key component of the ecosystem but expendable human comestible. Tracing the everyday life of this creature-cum-commodity provides a means for exploring the popular aesthetics, moral systems, and practices of people who inhabited the spaces in between Florida’s established order.17

17 Judy Attfield, Wild Things: The Material Culture of Everyday Life (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2000), 9. de Certeau, The Practice of Everyday Life. The framing of this study is inspired particularly by questions posed by Igor Kopytoff: “Where does the thing come from and who made it? What has been its career so far, and what do people consider to be an ideal career for such things? What are the recognized ‘ages’ or periods in the thing’s ‘life,’ and what are the cultural markers for them? How does the thing’s use change with its age, and what happens when it reaches the end of its usefulness?” Also instructive has been Kopytoff’s analysis of the process of “singularization,” through which things are
This social trajectory of the species, from table to trash, corresponds with the rise and fall of gill-net fishing for mullet in Florida. As a primary occupation, net-fishing for mullet and other inshore species was a means through which groups of people adapted to the environmental conditions of the region, becoming an elemental aspect of collective identity. Commercial net-fishing also served as a vehicle for the expression of ideological attachments to food production as a republican virtue. After the decline of this occupation in the late twentieth century, southwest Florida mullet entered a new stage in its social life, with reduced quantities of the species produced and its roe fashioned into a luxury food for elite consumers. The development of the boutique market for mullet roe was made possible by the erosion of mullet’s function as an affordable, ordinary staple for working-class, poor, and rural people and by the displacement of its producers. One goal of this project, thus, is to offer a case study through which the political implications of contemporary discourses regarding local, artisanal food production and sustainability can be critiqued.\(^\text{18}\)

Touching on the mullet fisheries that arose along the southwestern coasts of Florida during Spanish colonial occupation from the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries, the chronological focus of this dissertation spans the official U.S. acquisition of the territory in 1821 until the late twentieth century. Studying southwest Florida’s mullet fisheries during this time period allows for an examination of the construction of the everyday life of the place in contrast to the ideals and expectations imposed on the terrain and its people by those in position of political, economic, and scientific authority. With “publically precluded from being commoditized,” the meaning of the “priceless” condition of a non-commodity, he points out, can range “from the uniquely valuable to the uniquely worthless.” Igor Kopytoff, “The Cultural Biography of Things,” 66-67, 73, 75.

its deep social and biogeographical connections to the Gulf of Mexico, the Caribbean, and southeastern North America, Florida is a particularly suitable site for investigating variable levels of “national consciousness” among the American populace. For the military and civilian representatives of the United States who took possession of the territory from Spain, a large part of what it meant to become American entailed not just juridical notions of citizenship, but also social and cultural expectations regarding such things as property ownership, domesticity, kinship, race relations, language, and systems of commerce and exchange. Many of these dimensions of identity and belonging take shape within embodied interactions with the natural world. By examining the fluid cultural geographies produced by southwest Florida’s mullet fisheries, this project thus contributes to the scholarly investigation of alternatives to totalizing Anglo-American myths of origin for what was to become the United States. 19

In general terms, the sources used in this dissertation were analyzed for evidence of mullet and its cultural world within the dynamic interplay between the “customary consumption logics” of diverse cultural groups on the ground and in the waters of Florida and the “larger regimes of value” of the nation-state. In order to understand the reciprocal interactions between environmental, social, and cultural dynamics, I examined a broad array of texts for specific ways in which settlers, scientists, and political and business leaders described the environment of Florida and their accommodations to it. Sampling the vast body of travel and promotional narratives about the territory and state, I analyzed

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the informative and affective power of the verbal and visual imagery through which ideas of Florida were communicated to the nation. To provide historical and social context across a range of scales, I have situated detailed ethnographic findings in relation to fisheries’ and census data and broader trends in Florida’s history, such as the Second Seminole War; the development of an antebellum plantation belt; post-Civil War racial politics, labor relations, and New South developments; and twentieth century land booms and population growth.20

For archival evidence of the social production and consumption of mullet, my primary starting point was with documents produced by the United States Commission on Fish and Fisheries (commonly referred to as the U.S. Fish Commission, or USFC). Published reports as well as hand-written correspondence, field notes, and drawings, accessed primarily through the Smithsonian Institution Archives and other Smithsonian repositories, yielded historical details about the mullet and other fisheries of Florida in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as well as contextual information about the mission, philosophies, and practices of the USFC. These materials also were a rich source for ethnographic descriptions of Fish Commission researchers and the residents of Florida and other Southern states. The extraordinary collections of original documents contained in the Territorial Papers of the United States (edited by Clarence Edwin Carter), the Congressional Serial Set, and the American State Papers supplied critical historical and cultural detail. Also useful were publications of Florida’s fisheries and wildlife management institutions in their various incarnations (the Florida Shell Fish Commission, Board of Conservation, Department of Natural Resources, and Marine

Fisheries Commission), as were Florida Sea Grant publications. Fisheries statistics collected by the National Marine Fisheries Service and the Florida Fish and Wildlife Research Institute complemented the historical and cultural materials.

Various other Smithsonian archives, in particular the Warshaw Collection of Business Americana at the National Museum of American History (NMAH) Archives Center, the Dibner Library of the History of Science and Technology, and the NMAH Library, contained examples of the visual and written discourses extolling the terrestrial and aquatic riches to be garnered from Florida’s tropical plenitude. Reports issued by the state and federal Agriculture Departments, many of them accessed at the National Agricultural Library (NAL), provided similar material. Travel narratives, articles and images from popular media, and the digitized collections of the State Library and Archives of Florida were further sources for analyzing tropes of Florida as an agricultural and recreational paradise.

Ethnographic descriptions of mullet as a food and Florida foodways more generally appeared in USFC materials and in various collections of the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress. The restaurant menu, cookbook, oral history, and special collections of the University of South Florida Libraries’ Florida Studies Center also provided examples of mullet consumption in the state and region. Florida and regional newspapers contained a trove of contemporary details and discourses about the state’s commercial and recreational fisheries and about selling, cooking, and eating mullet. The Florida Fisherfolk Oral History interviews conducted by Robert Edic and others, archived with the University of Florida’s Samuel Proctor Oral History Program, provided historical information as well as critical insights into the social structures, ideas, and values of members of commercial fishing communities. Edic’s published work, along with that of local historians such as Vernon Peeples and Charles Dana Gibson, was likewise valuable, as were the number of dissertations and theses concerning Florida’s inshore fisheries. Finally, the ethnographic research I conducted in and about Florida fishing communities for over a decade, especially the oral history interviews with commercial fishing participants, mostly in Pine Island and Tampa, forms the heart of this project.
Structure

The dissertation begins with the development of Florida’s mullet fisheries, post-European colonization. In the first chapter, I examine the border-crossing fisheries that took root in southwestern Florida during the Spanish colonial period and persisted through the early period of U.S. possession, beginning in 1819. Operated from fishing camps called ranchos and based largely on salted mullet that was marketed in Cuba, these fisheries were engaged in by ethnically diverse groups. The existence of amalgamated communities comprised of people of indigenous, European, and African descent conflicted with attempts to Anglicize the territory and its people. This chapter treats the ethnic cleansing and eventual razing of the mullet-fishing ranchos as part of the broader effort by the United States to terminate Florida’s function as a maritime-oriented space of refuge from Anglo-American colonialism. In the process, settlers, politicians, and military leaders facilitated the spread of slave-based plantation agriculture. Through the violent implementation of racial and class hierarchies, the Americanization of Florida set the stage for centralizing ideologies pertaining to the region’s fisheries.

The second chapter turns to the work conducted by the U.S. Fish Commission (USFC) in Florida in the late nineteenth century, emphasizing the close relationship between American science and business. Focusing on the collecting work performed by Silas Stearns, a Maine-born resident of the peninsular state, this chapter argues that USFC research was a means not only for amassing information about the nation’s little-known fish species and fishing people, but also an instrument for spreading cultural ideas about citizenship. Impressed by Florida’s aquatic plentitude and in search of a species that could be integrated into national marketing systems, Stearns and the USFC turned to red snapper. These dynamics put Pensacola, Stearns’ adopted hometown, on the map as one of Florida’s earliest fishing capitals. Members of the nation’s nascent scientific establishment widely recognized the economic and cultural significance of mullet as a food fish. Nevertheless, the itinerant manner of its production and its regional circulation as a salted provision for rural and poor people, black and white, meant that the fish and the social structures associated with it were represented as elements of the backward past.

In the third chapter, I analyze the development of Florida as a domestic, tropical idyll in the American imagination from the antebellum period through the turn of the
nineteenth century. Combined with agricultural production, the three Rs that the state offered—rejuvenation, recreation, and real estate—were promoted as civilizing elements that would contribute to the advancement of the state and help reunify it with the nation in the aftermath of the Civil War. Promotion of Florida as a productive paradise, suitable for settlement by Northern, white families, strengthened the ethnic and class hierarchies that were developed during the initial U.S. occupation of the territory and subsequently advanced by the USFC. Although many of the people who fished for and consumed mullet were white, their manners of life failed to meet the Anglo-American ideals of productivity and domesticity. The continuation of mullet-based trade networks with Cuba and the species’ place as an egalitarian food within the southeastern region also hindered the species’ reception as an agent of American progress. During this period, the ambiguous position of the cultural world of mullet was heightened further by the development of sport-fishing in Florida as an element of personal transformation and social progress.

The fourth chapter examines the social relations and values that coexisted and competed with each other in Florida’s coastal domains during the early twentieth century. While ethnically diverse populations continued to be enmeshed in mullet’s production and consumption circuits, and the fish remained the backbone of the inshore commercial fishing industry, the species’ greatest function was as an instrument of cultural cohesion rather than a vehicle for social progress. As “New South” industrial developments took hold in Florida, increased fiscal and ideological investments in Florida’s seascape as a recreational paradise reached far greater economic significance than the mullet fisheries. With their legacy of connection to the Caribbean and Gulf of Mexico rim, environmentally adaptive lifestyles, and the commonplace nature of salted and fried mullet as a food, mullet-fishing people did not fit easily into the post-World War II conversion of Florida into the “Sunshine State.” Drawing heavily on oral history materials, I suggest in this chapter that Florida’s mullet-fishing people developed and defended commitments to a commonweal between themselves, the inshore marine waters, and everyday consumers as an alternative to the growth of the state’s seascape as a playground for the nation.
In the final chapter, I examine the mounting tensions during the late twentieth century between ideological investments in Florida’s inshore waters as a food-producing realm, on the one hand, and a site of leisure on the other. Although mullet remained a regionally important food, throughout the mid-century fishery researchers and state officials employed various strategies for increasing the harvest and consumption of the fish as an “underutilized” species. Post-war technological developments fueled experiments in preservation and distribution techniques while social strategies, such as the promotion of smoked mullet, also were pursued. By the 1970s, officials seized on the opportunities posed by new national trade policies to develop export markets for the roe. During this period, demographic changes in Florida contributed to enormous growth in the state’s recreational fishing industry, which enhanced mullet’s discursive status as bait. Ongoing tensions between net-fishing for food and angling for sport culminated in the successful 1994 citizens’ ballot initiative that banned gill nets in state waters, which rendered the species expendable as a food and commodity. The conversion of mullet to “trash” and the decline of mullet-fishing as an occupation, I conclude, was an outgrowth of the social hierarchies and capitalist ideologies that had fueled the social construction of Florida’s seascape as recreational domains. As such, its promises as an avenue for environmental sustainability should be questioned.
CHAPTER 1
RAZING THE RANCHOS, RESTRUCTURING RACE:
AMERICANIZING FLORIDA’S MULLET FISHERIES

Introduction

On the morning of March 17, 1885, the Albatross, a 234-foot steamship that the United States Commission on Fish and Fisheries had commissioned for deep-sea oceanic research, made its way as far into Tampa Bay as depth would permit. After the vessel had anchored off Gadsden Point—a spit of land dividing the estuary’s western fork, what is now called Old Tampa Bay, from the eastern fork, known as Hillsborough Bay—a small steam-cutter was dispatched to pick up mail and provisions from Tampa. During this shallow-water pit stop, Captain Joseph W. Collins and six of the crew lowered the vessel’s eighteen foot dinghy and rowed against the tide toward the mouth of the Little Manatee River, the beaches of which looked promising for good seine hauls. The goals of this expedition were to obtain specimens for the ship’s naturalist to examine, to supplement the food supplies obtained in town, and to relieve the frustrations of the previous several days, when deeper water soundings and dredging had not turned up the sought-for red snapper grounds.21

The purpose of the research trip as a whole, and the construction of the Albatross itself, was to develop and expand the nation’s fisheries. In his reports to Congress, U.S. Fish Commissioner Spencer F. Baird argued that increasing the industrial base of U.S. fisheries would enhance the overall stature of the nation scientifically, economically, and politically. Expanding fisheries to a broader range of waters and harvested species would augment domestic supplies and lower costs of food-fish; increase export revenues; decrease dependence on Canadian fisheries and waters for bait; increase employment for fishermen, processors, and boat builders; and help to secure and maintain “an ample sea-faring population” for the nation’s merchant marine as well as for its naval forces.

 Additionally, and “incidental to the economic inquiry,” the collection of marine specimens for scientific study would help place the United States on par with Europe in terms of its accumulation and dissemination of ichthyological knowledge.22

Baird and other USFC personnel identified the southern waters of the country, including the Gulf of Mexico, as potential new fishing grounds. In these waters, sea bass, red snapper, and other promising food fishes were known to be abundant and, Baird suggested, might also prove to be the winter grounds of familiar northern species such as king, Spanish, and horse mackerel as well as bluefish, menhaden, shad, salmon, and tilefish. Another fish that caught the attention of the Fish Commission was mullet, an abundant species in shallow, temperate to tropical waters, which was unknown in northern U.S. markets at the time. USFC scientist R. Edward Earll identified mullet as “first place in the list of edible fishes of the South,” and he anticipated the day when the entire southern coastline from North Carolina through Texas would be “one continuous mullet fishing ground.” An additional reason to direct the Albatross southward was that the crews of the growing southern fishing fleets, Baird supposed, were likely to be “more or less entirely American in their composition,” in contrast to the predominance of Canadians in the Gloucester fleets and other New England centers of late-nineteenth century U.S. fishery production.23 Encouraging the United States to stand on its own national feet as a global capital for fish production and for the production of knowledge about fish and fisheries was a primary motivating force for the Fish Commission in the first place.

As the crew from the Albatross rowed toward the Little Manatee River, they found that fish were plentiful in the shoals: “They could be seen jumping out of the water here and there, and occasionally a small school of mullet were noticed running along not far from the beach,” Collins noted. Having unloaded nets, guns, and other gear onshore, the seven men hauled the seine on the beach, without much success. Their net soon became clogged with algae and when the crew finally managed to make a haul, most of the fish escaped: a “large number of mullet” leaped over the top float line, and “more of them were seen to escape by running around the ends of the net.” Continuing to see fish “jumping out of the water in all directions” and “springing into the air,” the crew attempted a second haul, but experienced “mortification [from] seeing the fish we had inclosed [sic] jump the cork rope or dart by the wings of the net.” Mullet—famous for its leaping—was the most plentiful fish they encountered in the area, but other species of fish, including sharks, were also abundant. Collins gamely concluded that, despite the practical difficulties they experienced, they had made a “very fair haul” of jacks, catfish, sea trout, sheep’s-head, and billfish in addition to mullet.24

In his report on the 1885 Albatross research voyage, Collins remarked that he saw no local people during his Tampa Bay seining exploit.25 The apparent scarcity of human presence and fishing activity along the coasts of Tampa Bay was no accident. Rather, its roots lay in the racial violence of the Second Seminole War, a protracted and bloody war against Florida’s Indian and black populations that raged from 1835 until 1842. Prior to that period, the dense mangrove shorelines of Tampa Bay, as along most of the Gulf Coast, had been the scene of a great deal of activity, much of it connected to the mullet abundant in the region’s estuaries.

This chapter examines the dynamic sets of social relations that had structured Florida throughout Spanish rule. Well before the Fish Commission arrived on the scene, the region’s border-crossing mullet fisheries—operated from coastal settlements called ranchos—served as a foundation for an ethnically mixed cultural world that was not

25 Collins, “Albatross Report, 1885,” 276. This apparent dearth of people may not have reflected an absolute absence of population in the region. A two hundred and thirty-four foot steamship would have been visible well in advance of its arrival, giving anyone who did not want to encounter federal officials plenty of time to vanish.
easily contained within political boundaries. From the Spanish colonial period through the first decades of the nineteenth century, when Florida was ceded to the United States, diverse groups of people moved between the southwestern coast of the peninsula and the island of Cuba, harvesting and trading mullet and other marine species. In the process, these hybrid communities developed forms of identity derived from their adaptations to the specific locales they came to call home.

Mullet fishing along the Gulf Coast continued after the peninsula became an American territory in 1821, but the diverse cultural geography that trade in the species had helped foster was fractured. The “Spanish Indian” members of the fishery were forcibly expelled and the ability of the Gulf Coast and Florida in general to function as a safe haven for native people and free blacks was destroyed. The suppression of the mullet fishery’s blurred ethnic and political boundaries was one dimension through which Florida was reconfigured socially in order to accommodate the rigid “two-caste system of race relations” that underpinned the U.S. slave-based labor system.26 A primary motivation for razing the ranchos, thus, was to facilitate the spread of slavery and, more generally, support the growth of capitalist economic and social relations in the territory. In the long run, this ideological shift prompted the U.S. Fish Commission and others to seek out species of fish that could add value to the nation, a process that ultimately demoted the cultural and economic status of mullet.

Colonial Mullet and Spanish Indians

Subject to the oceanographic, political, and cultural currents of the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean, the estuaries and barrier islands of Florida’s ragged southwestern coast are zones of mixture: for salt and fresh water, and, over the centuries, for the multiple populations of people who have lived and trafficked with each other. A crossroads for colonial struggles for control in the Americas from the mid-eighteenth century onward, Florida was part of “the ‘maritime periphery’ of the Atlantic world, but

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still linked to a variety of Indian nations in the hinterlands.”

In the age of sail, this peninsular territory—bordered by the sea on three sides, extending toward the southern hemisphere, and just across the Straits from the important port city of Havana, Cuba’s capital and naval center—served as an active node in the maritime circulation of people, information, and goods—including mullet and other seafood. For centuries prior to U.S. possession of the peninsula, and increasingly from the British possession of the peninsula (1763-1783) and into the second Spanish period (1783-1819), seaborne commerce, transportation, and military and political traffic linked Florida to ports along the Gulf of Mexico, the Caribbean, and the southwestern Atlantic coasts, as well as the Mississippi and other inland river systems in North America.

European vessels, along with Indian canoes, were a familiar sight in the region throughout the eighteenth and into the nineteenth century. Traversing Florida’s east and west sea lanes, sloops, schooners and canoes traded an array of commodities, including timber and naval stores, mullet and other marine species, animal hides, live birds, and honey. These goods were exchanged for foodstuffs, textiles, consumer goods, religious items, arms and ammunition, and liquor. As William Bartram observed in his travels through Florida in 1774, members of the Lower Creek tribes who had settled along the Suwannee River habitually traveled along the Gulf Coast in cypress canoes, large enough to accommodate twenty to thirty people and sturdy enough to voyage to the Bahamas and Cuba.

During the British occupation of Florida, groups of Spanish-allied people among the Lower Creek tribes also voyaged to Havana aboard the Cuban fishing vessels that frequented the coast. Trade was one purpose of the Indian voyages to Cuba: Bartram noted that the Indians he met had procured tobacco, coffee, sugar, and “spirituous liquors” in exchange for goods they had harvested and processed. Likewise, an English trader based in the Apalachicola area reported in 1768 that a group of Indians in the vicinity appeared “very gay in their Spanish Cloaths,” having recently returned from a voyage to Havana.30 Beyond the exchange of goods, these trips to Cuba also involved negotiations between certain factions of Lower Creeks in the panhandle area and Spanish officials regarding the resumption of broad-scale Spanish trade within Florida and the possibility of returning the province to Spanish rule. The maritime passages of the fishing vessels and the transport of the Indians additionally provided cover for Spanish surveillance of British military activities and served as a means to survey the southwest coast of the peninsula for supplies of timber and naval stores.31

Active engagement of native peoples in the colonial politics of the region meant that by the 1780s, hundreds of “Hispanophile” Creeks from the panhandle were making diplomatic voyages to Cuba every year. By July 1779, when the Spanish moved from a position of official neutrality in regard to the rebellious American colonies to open declaration of war with Great Britain, weapons and ammunition were among the gifts Creek visitors to Havana were receiving from Cuban officials. According to archaeologist John Worth, the growing divide in late-eighteenth century Florida between Hitchiti-speaking Creeks allied with the British and Muskogee-speaking Creeks allied with the

Spanish was the foundation for what would develop into two distinct cultural entities: “the interior Seminoles” on the one hand and “the coastal Spanish Indians” on the other. Blending Creek and Spanish cultural traits and language, adapted to coastal habitats, and immersed in maritime occupations, the latter group represented an emergent ethnic group—self-identified and referred to by contemporary others as “Spanish Indians”—formed in Florida within the colonial period.  

The fishing ranchos in which the Spanish Indians lived and worked were communities that grew out of seasonal mullet-fishing expeditions to east and west coast Florida waters undertaken by Spanish fishermen based in Regla, Cuba since at least the late seventeenth century. Initially assisted by members of the Calusa nation, a sophisticated, fishing-dependent culture indigenous to southwest Florida, the Cuban-based fishermen began employing members of Creek and Yamasee Indians who had migrated from northern territories to the southern Gulf Coast of the peninsula beginning in the late eighteenth century. In his review of the history of Cuban fisheries, Ian Joyce points out that the waters of Florida, the Bahamas, and Mexico were the primary sources of fish for Havana markets during the colonial period. Regardless of whether the Cuban fishing fleet turned to Florida waters, and Floridian crews, because of depletion of the

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island’s fishing grounds, as Covington has suggested, it appears that the peninsula’s southern marine realms were treated as coterminous with the waters of the island. Cuban fishermen made use of Florida waters as a kind of back-door larder, proximate and accessible, and highly abundant in mullet and numerous other species.\textsuperscript{34}

Striped mullet is a key species in the extensive shallow estuary ecosystems along Florida’s southern Gulf Coast. By feeding directly on the organic materials found in layers of sediment, mullet and other smaller organisms that consume detritus make energy and nutrients available to carnivorous fish in these food webs, such as snappers, red drum, sheepshead, sea trout, groupers, jacks, and marine catfish. While Cuba contains similar ecosystems, littoral estuaries comprise only thirteen percent of the island’s shorelines, in contrast to covering about 75 percent of the 1,350 miles of coastline in Florida.\textsuperscript{35} The particular environmental conditions of Florida’s southern Gulf Coast—wide-ranging mangrove-lined estuaries in which mullet was highly abundant as a food fish itself and as an ecological foundation for a range of other desirable fish species—were part of what made the waters of the region so attractive to Cuban fishermen.

Along the central and southern Gulf Coast, eighteenth century observers noted the widespread presence of seasonal fishing operations. In June 1765, when the British surveyor George Gauld charted the waters of Espíritu Santo, as the Spanish called Tampa Bay, he commented on the huts constructed by Spanish fishermen on the “Mullet Kays,” as well as the abundance of fish, wildlife, wood, and fresh water in the region. At that time of year, the encampments were empty, but further south, in the Charlotte Harbor

\textsuperscript{34} Ian Joyce, “The Fisheries of the Cuban Insular Shelf: Culture, History and Revolutionary Performance” (PhD diss., Simon Fraser University, 1996). Covington, “Cuban Fishing Ranchos,” 19.

area, Gauld observed that the fish camps were bustling, both in the fall when mullet were running—gathering in large bunches to spawn offshore—and in the spring, when the Lenten demand for fish was high among Spanish Catholics. Gauld found that the southwestern Florida fisheries supplied Havana and other West Indian Spanish colonies with fish, much as fishermen in Newfoundland supplied the Mediterranean markets: “It is a very lucrative brand of trade,” he noted. In 1772, another British surveyor reported that each of the four Spanish schooners he saw was earning two thousand dollars per trip.36

During the 1760s and the 1770s, a number of other British and Spanish surveyors came across evidence of the thriving fisheries that animated the Gulf Coast of the peninsula, including Spanish schooners, palmetto-thatched huts, and racks for smoking fish. Bernard Romans, a botanist and cartographer hired by the British to survey Florida’s southern Gulf Coast between 1766 and 1769, commented on the high number of fishing encampments along the entire west coast of Florida, as well as some along the east coast. In the vicinity of Apalachicola, he wrote, the extensiveness of the fishing communities meant that “the Coast in some Measure Resembles that of Newfoundland.” According to Gauld and Romans, fishermen would settle in the ranchos each year between August and March, refurbishing their huts each season. Harvested with nets, the fish were split and salted before being pressed with weights in order to “sweat” out the salt. Strung on silk grass, mullet and other species were dried in the sun or over a fire. Spanish trade restrictions meant that the fishermen had to purchase salt from warehouses in Havana at great expense. Romans estimated that about one thousand tons of dried salted fish were produced annually along Florida’s Gulf Coast for export to Cuba, with some thirty vessels engaged in this commerce; he advocated that the British insinuate themselves into this “Beneficial Article of Trade” by taking over the supply of salt to the Spanish fishermen and introducing British vessels and crews into the fishery.37

Six years into the British control of Florida, the commander in charge of Fort St. Marks expressed his concern that the collective fishing, hunting, and trading activities engaged in by Spaniards and Creeks along the Gulf Coast might create a foothold for the former Iberian regime and their allies. Governor James Grant, however, chose not to interfere with such “Friendly Intercourse” between the Spanish and the Creeks, not least because his administration lacked the human resources to do so. Wary that provocations against this commerce might result in Spanish disruption of British contraband trade through Pensacola and other Gulf Coast ports, Grant reasoned that the Spanish and Indian coastal fisheries in Florida were neither of direct use nor a hindrance to British control of the peninsula. The only reason that the Spanish frequented Florida was to supply Havana markets with fish, and the only reason they cultivated good relationships with the Indians was to “prevent their Fishermen being Scalped,” he argued. In any event, the Governor suggested, any potential settlements that might be formed out of such activities would “introduce a Dollar Trade,” which ultimately would provide a foundation for English settlement. Even after the Spanish began supplying their Creek allies in Florida with arms in 1779, the British generally did not interfere with the fishery-based traffic between the peninsula and Cuba.

After the Spanish regained possession of Florida in 1783, and well after the beginning of official American acquisition of the territory in 1819, the Gulf waters along the southern Atlantic tip of the peninsula continued to supply seafood for Cuban markets.

Bernard Romans (Deland: Florida State Historical Society, 1924), 123-127. In addition to Romans and Gauld, the Spanish cartographers Jose de Evia and Vicente Folch y Juan also observed the Cuban-based fisheries of Florida’s Gulf coast in the late-eighteenth century. Matthews, Edge of Wilderness, 66-71.

38 James Wright to James Grant, Savannah, 15 June 1769. “Friendly Intercourse,” James Grant to John Stuart, St Augustine, 4 September 1769. “Dollar Trade” and “Fishermen being Scalped,” James Grant to John Gordon, St Augustine, 18 September 1769. From the James Grant of Ballindalloch Papers, Governorship Series, National Archives of Scotland, Edinburgh, transcribed by James Hill, University of North Florida, Florida History Online. http://www.unf.edu/floridahistoryonline/Projects/Grant/letters.html#010.

39 According to James Covington, the Spanish weaponry probably was delivered to northern Florida towns rather than to the remote fisheries along the southwestern coast, which were distant from the Creek military leadership. Grant’s position on the Spanish-Indian fisheries therefore may not have been unreasonable; see Covington, “The Cuban Fishing Ranchos.”
Romans observed that marine fish of all kinds abounded in Florida waters “in such Innumerable Quantity’s as exceed even Imagination.” Cuban vessels fished for sea turtles, manatees, red and black drum, pompano, turbot (flounder), sea trout, sheepshead, and mullet. Called *botango* or *botargo* by the Spanish in Florida and Cuba, the egg sack of mullet—when salted, dried in the sun, pressed between boards, and then smoked over a corn cob fire—was an epicurean commodity, reported to be “equal to the caviar of Europe.” Since ancient times, mullet roe preserved in such a manner has been a delicacy in the Mediterranean region, where linguistic variations on the term *botango* are still in use. The same species of mullet that is so prevalent along Florida’s Gulf Coast, *Mugil cephalus*, also is found in Mediterranean waters, where not only the roe but the meat of the fish still is eaten today. Juan López de Velasco, a cosmographer for the Spanish court, had observed in 1575 that the nets used in the Calusa’s “great mullet fishery” in Tampa Bay were similar to those used to harvest mullet in Spain. Spanish colonists in Florida and Cuba thus may have brought with them a familiarity with mullet fishing as well as a taste for the species and for *botargo* in particular.41

Contemporary accounts from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries suggest that cosmopolitan consumers in Havana and other urban centers in Cuba tended to eat fresh fish, with preferences for various snapper and grouper species, pompano, and red drum, along with shrimp, crab, oysters, and clams. Salted and dried fish were more common in the countryside, and in particular in the diets of enslaved peoples, especially during

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periods when another staple, *tasajo* (sun-dried meat), was unavailable or too expensive. While Ian Joyce posits that the source of most of this preserved fish was salt-cod from Newfoundland, Romans observed in the late eighteenth century that Florida salt-fish was much more highly esteemed in the West Indies than salted fish from the northwestern Atlantic fishing banks.\(^{42}\)

Given the evident appetite for botango in Florida and Cuba during the colonial period, it is likely that once the roe had been extracted (and during non-spawning seasons), the flesh of mullet would have been salted as a primary component of the Cuban trade. This would have been especially true after the boom in sugar production on the island beginning in the late eighteenth century, which was accompanied by a rapid increase in the population of enslaved peoples. Thus, as Covington maintains, mullet and other fish harvested from the shallow waters of southwestern Florida provided an accessible, bulk source of protein for feeding slaves on Cuban plantations.\(^{43}\)

**Residence in the Ranchos**

As the business of trading mullet and other fish grew in southwest Florida, alongside the growth in Cuba’s slave-based economy, the ranchos shifted from being

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\(^{43}\) Covington, “Trade Relations.” The Cuban sugar boom and increase in slave population was precipitated first by the British, who introduced 10,000 slaves during their 1762-1763 occupation of the island in attempt to build up the sugar industry. An additional stimulus to Cuban sugar production was the 1791 slave uprising on the French colony of Saint Domingue and the consequent collapse of the sugar industry there, which created openings in the world market for sugar from other locales, including Cuba. As David Watts notes, technological innovations such as steam-driven cane-processing machinery helped drive nineteenth century sugar production in Cuba. It appears that salt-mullet from southwest Florida literally fed this slave economy as well. David Watts, *The West Indies: Patterns of Development, Culture and Environmental Change Since 1492* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 303-304. J.H. Parry, *Spanish Seaborne Empire*, 302, 311. On the morning after a nighttime mullet-fishing trip on the Indian River on Florida’s east coast, Bernard Romans observed the roe sacks being extracted from the female fish, while most of the bodies were tossed back to sea. Phillips, *Notes on the Life and Works*, 125. Whether this provides evidence of waste precipitated by the enormous abundance of mullet in Florida waters or represents a singular observation of discards is not clear.
seasonal camps to becoming permanent settlements, increasing in population size. According to a report by U.S. Customs Collector Jesse Willis, by 1830 the fisheries on the islands of southwestern Florida engaged between four hundred and six hundred people during the peak of the season.\footnote{Jesse Willis’ 1830 report cited in Hammond, “The Spanish Fisheries” and in Charles Dana Gibson, \textit{Boca Grande: A Series of Historical Essays} (Great Outdoors Publishing, 1982), 21.} William Whitehead, the Collector of Customs in Key West, visited a number of the fishing \textit{ranchos} in the Charlotte Harbor area aboard a Revenue Cutter in 1831, by which time four fishing communities were inhabited by over two hundred people representing several generations. The head of the \textit{rancho} on the island currently known as Useppa, José María Calde\texttt{z}, claimed to have visited the place sometime “before the ‘Declaration of Independence’ was promulgated” and to have lived there since 1784. In association with a prominent Key West merchant, Joseph Ximenez, Calde\texttt{z} operated the Useppa fishery on behalf of the House of Bardias, a Havana-based trading firm. Calde\texttt{z} also claimed land and ran a \textit{rancho} in the Tampa Bay area, independent of the Bardias enterprise.\footnote{Vernon Peeples, “Commercial Fishing in Southwest Florida,” Manatee County Historical Society Meeting Address, November 20, 1968, transcribed by Libby Warner.}

Funneled through imperial strategies for control and indigenous struggles for autonomy, elements of the region’s competing economic and political forces fed the social structures and daily life of the \textit{ranchos}. Akin to the “middle ground” of the \textit{pays d’en haut} Great Lakes region of the late seventeenth through early nineteenth century, the milieu of the \textit{ranchos} was “a place in between…cultures, peoples, and in between empires and the nonstate world of villages.”\footnote{Thelma Peters, “William Adee Whitehead’s Reminiscences of Key West,” \textit{Tequesta} 25 (1965), 37-38. Whitehead to Honorable Lewis McLane, Secretary of the Treasury, 17 November 1831, H. Doc, No. 201-22 at 1-3 (1831). Hammond, “The Spanish Fisheries.”} In addition to the men, women, and children who operated the fisheries and lived in the \textit{rancho} households—which included Spanish Indians, Spaniards (born in Spain or in Spanish colonies in the Americas), African-descendent, and mixed-race people—settlements of Seminole Indians and “refugee Negoes” were interspersed along the coastal zones from Tampa Bay southward.

\textit{Ranchos} of Southwest Florida.

to Charlotte Harbor. The result was a syncretic mix of people and custom along the southwestern maritime fringe of the Florida peninsula.

Several accounts by European and American visitors to the ranchos during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century convey some of the typical components of daily life. Dwellings generally were square or rectangular wood frames thatched with saw palmetto fronds (*Serenoa repens*), a common palm shrub that grows throughout the southern coastal plains. The interiors were simple: lofts for storage, a shelf or two, a few utensils and pieces of crockery, stools for seating, cots and perhaps hammocks for sleeping, and small fires for warmth in the cooler months and, one imagines, for insect control. During his 1831 visit to the Charlotte Harbor ranchos, William Whitehead saw “the figure of an angel” adorning one of the fishery’s buildings, later musing in his journal over whether this signified a house of worship.

Indian and Spanish members of the rancho communities traveled fluidly between Cuba and Florida. Marriages between Spaniards and Indians were recognized by the Spanish colonial regimes as legitimate, and the children born of these unions often were baptized as Catholics on the island. Of the thirty baptisms performed on Florida Indians in Regla, Cuba between 1807 and 1827, most had Spanish fathers and Indian mothers but some had two Indian parents; a few enslaved children also were associated with the ranchos and at least some of them were baptized and manumitted. In January 1821, for example, Useppa rancho operator José Caldez captained his vessel, *Nuestra Señora del*...
Rosario, from Charlotte Harbor to Cuba. Among his one hundred and thirty-three passengers were the families of two children, Fernando Gonzalez and Ana Masearreño, who were to be baptized in the church of Nuestra Señora de Regla. The mothers of both children were Useppa-born Indians (named Manuela and Fabla), while the fathers were born in Asturias, Spain (Fernando Gonzalez) and the Canary Islands (José Masearreño). Nested in the remote, agriculturally undeveloped region of southwestern Florida, the ranchos were physically situated in what has long been characterized as a backwater of the colonial Americas. As reflected by the names and lineages of the rancho people, however, the economy and culture of these mullet fisheries were immersed in the cosmopolitan, Iberian-inflected Atlantic maritime world.49

While many observers commented that the inhabitants of these fishing communities lived primarily on mullet and other fish, turtles, clams, oysters, and other seafood, a variety of additional foods were obtained through horticulture, foraging, and trade. In rancho gardens, corn, squash, pumpkin, melons, a number of peas and beans, possibly tomatoes and cabbage, potatoes, sweet potatoes, and herbs were raised. Coconut, lime, orange, papaya, and plum trees were established. Starches and breads were derived from coontie root (Zamia pumila), a cycad that served as a staple for the native peoples of Florida for thousands of years, as well as from native persimmons (Diospyros virginiana), sarsparilla root (Smilax spp.), and tickseed (Coreopsis spp.). The core of cabbage palms (Sabal palmetto) and saw palmettos provided another native starch. Rice was obtained through trade with Cuba, and the seeds of the native switch cane (Arundinaria gigantean) also were eaten, when available. Non-seafood sources of animal protein included feral hogs, venison, and waterfowl and other wild birds.50


50 Sources for dietary information are listed in footnote 48. Romans, A Concise Natural History is particularly detailed. Evidence that tomatoes may have been grown in rancho gardens comes from John Lee Williams’ observations of “extensive old fields” in the coastal areas of Sarasota Bay, where he saw: “among luxuriant weeds, tomatas, lima beans, and many aromatic herbs, perfectly naturalized.” John Lee Williams, Territory of Florida, 24.
A combination of global trading circles and in situ provisioning systems sustained these coastal settlements, as demonstrated by the fare served to rancho guests in the first several decades of the nineteenth century. Dishes of fried or cold fish were eaten with potatoes and onions. Broiled wild pigeon, roast pork, venison, and rice and fowl pilau also were served. Rounding out these meals were “excellent white bread and strong coffee.” Visiting Sanibel and other islands in the vicinity of Charlotte Harbor in 1833, Dr. Benjamin Strobel strolled along in the moonlight after one such fine dinner. Sampling “splendid Spanish Segars” with his host, the proprietor of the rancho on Punta Rasa, Strobel was invited to observe an “Indian Ball.” The men, women, and children played drums, sang, and danced, in pairs and in groups. Some of the dances, Strobel thought, resembled a “Spanish fandango.” A circular dance, in which only women participated, their legs adorned with leather cuffs decorated with box turtle shells, seems to have been Indian in origin. After the evening’s entertainment, Strobel retired to a cot set up for him in a storehouse, smoking his cigar and watching the flames of a small fire burning in the center of the room. In his narrative, he observed that in spite of being an unarmed, solitary, Anglo stranger in the hands of “six or eight Spaniards, and twenty or thirty Indians,” he felt “not the slightest apprehension…confident that the rights of hospitality would not be violated,” eventually falling asleep peacefully and rising in the morning for a beach stroll with another first-rate cup of coffee.\(^5\)

Plants and animals native to Florida were harvested and sold in the ranchos, but so were products whose origins lay in Africa, the Indo-Pacific, Asia, Europe, and the American tropics. By 1835—sixteen years after the treaty that conveyed Florida from Spain to the United States was signed—the schooners and smacks that carried mullet roe, fish oil, salted fish, and other marine products to Havana returned laden with a wide array of goods, both for the ranchos and for sale in Key West, Cedar Keys, Fort Brooke (later to become Tampa), and as far as St. Marks and Pensacola on the panhandle. Shipping manifests and customs records indicate that these goods included building supplies, tools, and textiles as well as comestibles such as coffee, sugar, rice, fruits and vegetables.

\(^5\) Hammond, “Sanibel Island and Its Vicinity,” 403-404. Whitehead similarly was impressed with the quality of the coffee served on the ranchos, which he deemed to be “‘superior…to any to be met with in half the Coffee Houses in the United States’.” Matthews, Edge of Wilderness, 73.
meats, cooking oils, bread, and wine. In commerce and in custom, the world of the ranchos reflected the international mix of people, ideas, flora and fauna, and goods out of which they arose.

Geopolitical Context of the Ranchos

This blend of people and goods had taken root in a particular physical locale, cultural environment, and political context. By the late eighteenth century, when the ranchos had come to be inhabited year-round, the peninsula of Florida had been functioning for about a century as a refuge for diverse populations of Native peoples as well as for people of African descent liberating themselves from enslavement in the southeastern regions of North America. As Jane Landers and other historians have noted, during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries’ chaotic years of revolution and imperial contestation, “amalgamated communities” of Indians, self-emancipated blacks, and some people of European descent established themselves throughout southeastern North America apart from, and in resistance to, colonial power structures. Swamps, rivers, and remote coastal areas were particularly attractive sites of refuge because they were relatively inaccessible and afforded access to aquatic pathways of escape. Florida’s geographical position—physical and political—made it especially alluring to those who sought to remove themselves from the colonial project.

Through British-sponsored slave raids into the Spanish territory, Creeks and Yamasses had been entering Florida since the 1680s. While most of the indigenous native populations of the peninsula had been decimated through disease, warfare, and emigration to Cuba by the mid-eighteenth century, immigration into the peninsula by bands of Creek-related peoples was so extensive that by the commencement of the American Revolution, Amerindians made up the majority of the populace in Florida.


These diverse native groups, living in loosely connected but largely autonomous settlements, were an emergent ethnicity that came to be called Seminole in the mid-eighteenth century; the word was derived from the Spanish term, *cimarrón*. Originally referring to feral cattle on the Spanish colony of Hispaniola and then to runaway Indians, *cimarrón* (English: maroon) came to refer mainly to people of African descent who had escaped slavery: the terms “Seminole” and “maroon” thus share the same etymological roots.\(^{55}\)

The extensive populations of self-emancipated blacks who found freedom in Florida from the late 1680s onward are best understood as an example of *marronage* within the North American continent.\(^{56}\) The use of the peninsula as a site of refuge for enslaved people of African descent had begun by the late seventeenth century, partly as a consequence of the period’s disputes between Guale, Yamasee, Timucuan, Apalachee, and Muscogulge peoples and British and Spanish colonists in the “debatable lands” that comprised the border region between southern Virginia and northern Florida. In 1670, planters from Barbados founded the colony of Carolina in indigenous territory that had been claimed by Spain. By the early eighteenth century, enslaved blacks, most of them

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born in Africa, were imported to the colony in great numbers to produce rice, indigo, cotton, and tobacco for export. Slave rebellions and escapes followed, the latter often with the assistance of native people opposed to the British claims on Indian territory.\textsuperscript{57} After the first recorded fugitives from Carolina arrived in 1687 in St. Augustine via canoe, the Governor of Florida saw to their baptism in Catholicism, found them skilled work for wages, and refused to relinquish them to their British Carolinian owners. Throughout the enslaved communities of the southeast, word of the possibilities for sanctioned asylum in the Spanish peninsula spread. As new groups of runaways fled to St. Augustine over the next three years, Florida began its career as a “southbound ‘underground railroad.’”\textsuperscript{58}

By 1693, the Spanish Crown declared an official policy of religious sanctuary, declaring that people fleeing slavery in the British colonies north of Florida would be baptized as Catholics and freed. This policy was affirmed in 1733, with the additional condition of four years of service to the Spanish crown prior to emancipation. In large part, the sanctuary policy had strategic motivations: encouraging blacks to settle in Florida increased the population of the colony, augmented the labor force, and helped create a black militia renown for its bravery and effectiveness in defending the Spanish colony against acts of aggression by the British and their Indian allies. In turn, hundreds of enslaved people in South Carolina and Georgia took strategic advantage of Spanish Florida’s sanctuary policy. That the ninety participants in South Carolina’s 1740 Stono Rebellion were headed for St. Augustine illustrates the appeal of the Catholic colony as a relative safe haven.\textsuperscript{59}


\textsuperscript{58} Jane Landers, \textit{Atlantic Creoles in the Age of Revolutions} (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 98. See also Landers, “Slave Resistance.” Riordan, “Finding Freedom.”

The free black town of Gracia Real de Santa Teresa de Mose represents the best-known embodiment of an officially sanctioned route to emancipation in Florida. Established in 1738 as a frontier defensive post on a tributary of the North River, Fort Mose was situated about two miles north of Saint Augustine. Rebuilt in a nearby location in 1752 after the first fort was destroyed by British and Indian forces in 1740, the fort was inhabited by a diverse “Afro-Indo-Hispanic community” comprised of men and women who had been born in multiple West and Central African nations, people of African descent born in North and South America or the West Indies, Indians from East Florida villages, and a few Spaniards. 60 Notwithstanding the self-interested motives of the Spanish crown and the less than complete freedom afforded those who were granted sanctuary in Fort Mose and in St. Augustine, fugitives from slavery made use of local resources, political circumstances, and knowledge drawn from multiple cultural groups in order to create opportunities for independence.

Archaeological investigations demonstrate that the technologies and practices within Fort Mose reflected a mix of African, Indian, and European influences. The subsistence strategies of the fort’s residents reveal a much greater degree of self-sufficiency relative to Spanish households in nearby St. Augustine, which relied more on imported and locally marketed foods. Elizabeth Reitz’s analysis of faunal remains from Fort Mose and the nearby Indian mission village of Nombre de Dios indicates, for example, that in both sites nearshore species such as Atlantic croaker and fingerling mullet were harvested using baskets, weirs, and handlines along the shoreline. Such fishing practices were familiar both to West Africans and the indigenous peoples from the southeastern coastal plains of North America. The adult mullet bones found in the faunal remains from Spanish households within St. Augustine, on the other hand, probably reflect the use of cast nets in deeper waters, perhaps employed by professional fishermen. Reitz argues that the similar patterns of use of estuarine resources in Fort Mose to the Nombre de Dios village point toward a high level of adaptation to local

60 Landers, Black Society in Spanish Florida, 52. Riordan, “Finding Freedom.”
environmental conditions and a blending of African and Indian knowledge, skills, and foodways.  

Although most of Florida’s free black residents took part in the evacuation to Cuba after the Spanish loss of colony to England in 1763, the population of people of African descent in the peninsula continued to grow. During their twenty years of rule, the British expanded the plantation economy in Florida, envisioning a pattern of development modeled after South Carolina’s slave-based agricultural production system. The enslaved black populace of Florida was augmented by loyalist slaveholders who fled from South Carolina and Georgia towards the end of the American Revolution: by 1783, some ten thousand slaves were living in Florida, which was about double the number of whites. Alongside the slave population, the numbers of blacks living outside of the world of the plantation also grew during the period of British rule, a population comprised of maroons (fugitives from Florida and other southeastern plantations) and blacks associated with the Seminoles. Much like the Fort Mose inhabitants, the lifestyles of people in these independent villages reflected combinations of African, Indian, and European customs.

The resumption of Spanish rule in 1784 initially brought a return to the sanctuary policy, and hundreds of blacks who had been enslaved by the British in Florida sought freedom through that channel. Unknown numbers of others pursued “extralegal pathways” of escape, finding refuge in Florida’s “trackless forests and swamps, and rivers and oceans,” terrain that was for many people of European descent

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61 Elizabeth J. Reitz, “Zooarchaeological Analysis of a Free African Community: Gracia Real de Santa Teresa de Mose,” *Historical Archaeology* 28, no. 1 (1994), 23-40. Reitz states that the shoreline fishing gear in use in and around Mose may have been employed primarily by the Native American women who were married to men of African descent. As Kevin Dawson emphasizes, however, West Africans also employed such gears and brought their fishing traditions with them to the Americas. Dawson, “Enslaved Watermen in the Atlantic World, 1444-1888” (PhD diss., University of South Carolina, 2005). Additional details about life within Ft. Mose are drawn from Kathleen Deagan and Darcie MacMahon, *Fort Mose: Colonial America’s Black Fortress of Freedom* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1995).

incomprehensible, impenetrable, and uninhabitable. By the early nineteenth century, the peninsula was dotted with settlements of free blacks and Seminoles, who were “autonomous, fiercely militant, and extremely wary of Americans.” The Seminoles tended to rely upon people of African descent for their linguistic skills—many spoke English, Spanish, or French in addition to African and Native tongues—as well as for their military prowess, knowledge of Spanish society and its legal institutions, and familiarity with the “shifting political currents” between competing European and American powers. Interdependent and linked through networks of kinship, Seminoles and self-emancipated blacks were united in opposition to U.S. expansionism and in defense of the space of relative freedom they carved out of the sparsely populated Florida terrain.

In both East and West Florida, Spain’s hold on its repossessed territory was tenuous. Since 1795, the nascent United States had been consolidating its claims on the southeastern swath of the North American continent through diplomatic means, by establishing trading posts, and—acting as a “fledgling vulture”—through invasion and annexation of Spanish territory, covertly approved by Congress and President James Madison. West Florida in particular represented a crossroads of conflicting claims to physical territory, along with its political and cultural configurations, contestations engaged in by Spanish, U.S., British, Indian, and African-descended soldiers and residents.


Strengthening the numbers of allied Seminoles and self-emancipated blacks was the British policy during the War of 1812 of recruiting enslaved people as soldiers and guides. As stated in a proclamation issued by the commander of British naval forces in American waters, Vice-Admiral Alexander Cochrane, slaves who chose to “emigrate” to the British side could choose between “entering into his Majesty’s sea or land forces, or of being sent as FREE settlers to the British possessions in North America or the West Indies.” Equipped with copies of this proclamation, the British Colonel Edward Nicolls and the Jamaican trader George Woodbine traveled throughout West Florida between April and August 1814 in order to recruit and train Seminoles, Red Stick Creeks, and maroon and Seminole blacks. Nicolls expressed a notion of freedom infused with Christian ethics and contemporary Enlightenment notions of universal equality and the natural rights of Man, advocating an interpretation of emancipation that went well beyond the circumscribed notions of liberty espoused by his military superiors. The promotion by Nicolls of race-blind rights of citizenship contributed to the appeal of the British as allies in the revolutionary climate of the early nineteenth century. British policies stood in clear contrast to the twin American practices of seizing Indian lands and extending slavery and to the 1790 abrogation by the Spanish of their religious sanctuary policy, under pressure from the United States.

As word of British offers of freedom spread among the “Men of Colour” whom Nicolls hoped to recruit, thousands of allied Indians and blacks from Spanish and U.S. territories gathered at Prospect Bluff on the eastern banks of the Apalachicola River.

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some fifteen miles inland from the Gulf. Over the course of the summer, fortifications were built to protect the British arms and ammunition that had been landed in the area, along with the growing community of soldiers and settlers. By the end of 1814, about three thousand Red Stick Creeks and Seminoles and four hundred people of African descent had settled in the area. When Nicolls sailed from the fort in June 1815, some six months after the Treaty of Ghent was signed ending the war between the British and the United States, he left behind a generous supply of arms and ammunition. Many of the Indians also left the fort, but hundreds of blacks remained and more fugitives continued to arrive. Based on contemporary accounts, historian Nathaniel Millet estimates that after the departure of the British, about five hundred men, women, and children lived in and around what had come to be known as the Negro Fort.

The inhabitants came from many backgrounds, having escaped from Spanish, English, French, and U.S. slave societies in North America and the Caribbean. Many had been born in the Americas, but a good number were African by birth; some had lived in Indian villages, some had been living in independent maroon communities, and others had fled or been liberated from slavery in Pensacola and other towns and West Florida plantations. As Millet argues, the set of occupational skills, experiences, and cultural traditions possessed by members of this community uniquely equipped them to navigate the biogeographical and political challenges of life in West Florida. In the process, the Negro Fort maroons built a well-organized and disciplined society, while “creating the material basis of citizenship” and “envision[ing] an expansive future.”

As was the case for the residents of Mose, self-sufficiency and adaptability was key to the survival of this community, which depended largely on the ability of its inhabitants to make use of local resources for housing, food, transportation, and security. The fields planted in the environs of the fort were reported to extend some fifty miles along the Apalachicola River. In addition to practicing agriculture, members of the Negro

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Fort settlement sustained themselves through hunting, fishing, foraging, trade, and raids on nearby plantations. The fort was surrounded on three sides by marsh and woods, which were home to copious game animals. Located on the eastern banks of the river, the settlement also had access to a large variety of fish species, including the freshwater-tolerant mullet.

Expanding the Refuge

For American slaveholders in regions adjacent to the Floridas, the widespread presence of self-emancipated black people represented an increasingly intolerable threat that had to be stopped through a combination of settlement by white farming families and military means. The peninsula had become the “refuge of fugitive slaves,” according to John Houston McIntosh, a wealthy planter from East Florida who became second-in-command of the self-proclaimed Patriot militia from Georgia that invaded East Florida in 1812. If the Florida territories were not seized by America from Spain, they posed the danger of serving as a base for “a revolt of the black population in the States” akin to the “horrors of St. Domingue,” McIntosh warned, raising the specter of the Republic of Haiti, which had celebrated its hard-won independence only eight years previously.69

On the heels of East Florida’s Patriot War, Andrew Jackson’s seizure of West Florida followed the same logic. Secretary of War William Crawford advised Jackson in March 1816 that the presence of the Prospect Bluff stronghold of free blacks would “ultimately endanger the peace of the nation” by threatening plantation settlement in the region; “heavy cannon,” Crawford stated, “will be necessary to batter it.” Jackson concurred, suggesting that the Fort was inhabited by negro and Indian “banditti” who were inducing “the slaves of our citizens to desert from their owner’s service,” with the ultimate “purpose of murder, rapine, and plunder.”70 On July 27, 1816, under orders from Jackson, United States Navy gunboats fired upon the fort. During the attack, a heated...

69 McIntosh quoted in Cusick, The Other War of 1812, 213.
cannonball entered the ammunition magazine, causing an enormous explosion and immediately killing two hundred-seventy people within. The American demolition of the Negro Fort “smashed the African power base on the Apalachicola” and heralded the waves of ethnic warfare through which the United States took possession of Florida.  

While this stronghold of resistance to slavery was destroyed, however, the determination of blacks and Native peoples throughout Florida to maintain their independence was not. Aware of the approach of the U.S. military before the bombardment, many inhabitants of the villages outside the Negro Fort fled toward existing maroon and Indian settlements in the Suwannee River, Tampa Bay, and Charlotte Harbor areas. Even as American aggression in northern segments of Spanish West and East Florida intensified, the ongoing flow of people and goods between the southern Gulf Coast of Florida, Cuba, and the Bahamas continued. These circuits of commodity and cultural exchange were of great use to people in search of livelihoods, sustenance, and social networks independent of slavery and the plantation regime. Distinct from the Spanish Indians who had been members of the coastal fishing ranchos since the late eighteenth century, the Seminoles who settled in the remote southern and central regions of the peninsula herded cattle, established agricultural settlements, raised livestock, and hunted and traded pelts and agricultural goods.

Blacks also engaged in agriculture in the region, but many of them were associated with littoral activities as well. Maritime skills were part of the cultural capitol many enslaved people brought with them from West Africa to the Americas. Throughout the Americas, fishing and diving, boatbuilding and boat repair, navigation, and other maritime trades occupied a great number of blacks—as skilled slaves, as free folk earning a living, and as fugitives and maroons creating lives within the cracks of the hegemonic system. These skills long had provided people of African descent with relatively greater


levels of mobility and freedom than plantation labor, and as such were a “way out” of the oppressive systems of slave-based agricultural production.\textsuperscript{73}

Occupying a key geographical position between Cuba and the West Indies, the littoral fringe of the Gulf of Mexico, and the western Atlantic shoreline, the southern tip of Florida offered plentiful maritime occupational opportunities. Those people of African descent who possessed prior maritime experience had valuable skills to contribute to a social milieu that was heavily reliant on waterways for everyday survival. Black people who settled along the southwestern coast of Florida—a peripheral area relatively free of oversight by external political authorities—could take advantage of the economic possibilities afforded by harvesting, processing, and selling the region’s copious supplies of mullet, sea turtle, sponges, and other marine organisms; wrecking, navigation, and piloting; coastal timbering; schooner and smack construction and maintenance; and the loading and distribution of goods. Maritime connections to Cuba, the Bahamas, and other Gulf of Mexico ports also provided avenues for escape if need be. Within an ethnically hybrid world characterized by fluidity rather than a rigid racial caste system, the social identities of blacks, Indians, and others who sought to fashion autonomous lives had relative room to flourish.\textsuperscript{74}

Black fugitives fleeing attacks by U.S. militia members in the 1812 invasions of East Florida settled along the banks of the Manatee River in the vicinity of Sarasota. Having attracted “picaroons of all nations” at least since 1772, the place was referred to as Angola by the area’s Cuban fishermen and it may have been one of the sites from which Nicolls and Woodbine recruited black soldiers. According to a group of Americans


who surveyed Charlotte Harbor and Tampa Bay in 1832 and 1833, during the first two
decades of the century as many as two hundred blacks associated with the British may
have been living along the banks of these rivers, a site which they called Negro Point.75

As a known gathering place for fugitive blacks, Angola was raided by American-
allied Lower Creeks in 1821, as were Spanish fishing ranchos in the region. While about
three hundred people were kidnapped, others eventually made their way to the Bahamas,
and still others managed to remain in the area.76 At least some of these seem to have
continued to work in the region’s fisheries. In 1822, Horatio Dexter, a planter who served
as an Indian agent in the newly American territory, reported to the territorial governor,
William P. Duval, that “about 80 refugee Negroes belonging to Indians and Citizens of
this territory” were based in Tampa Bay, where they were “employed by the Havana
fishing smacks, & pass to Cuba frequently, the crews of these smacks bring goods to
trade with the Indians.” The fisheries’ fluid ethnic composition and border-crossing
economic circuits became an increasing irritant to the process of incorporating the
borderland region into the northern body of the continent.77

Americanizing Florida’s Southwest Coast

For many Anglo-American settlers in Florida, as for U.S. political leaders, a
central goal of Americanizing the territory was to transform it from what was perceived
as an unstructured, sparsely inhabited wilderness into a plantation regime capable of

75 The “picaroons of all nations” phrase is in a letter from an English merchant, cited in
Brown, “Tales of Angola,” 8. For “Angola” as a place name for extensive areas of land
north and south of Oyster River (now known as the Manatee River), see claims from
Joaquin Caldez (Box 2, Folder 2) and Jose Maria Caldez (Box 2, Folder 3) in
“Unconfirmed Spanish Land Grant Claims, 1763-8121,” United States Board of Land
Commissioners. Available digitally through the Florida Department of State, Division of
Point,” see notes from an 1832-1833 survey of the southwest Florida coast by William
Hackley (son of Richard Hackley, to whom the Spanish Duke of Allagon had sold an
enormous tract of land in the Tampa Bay and Charlotte Harbor area), in John Lee
76 Brown, “Tales of Angola.” Canter Brown, “The ‘Sarrazota, or Runaway Negro
Plantations’: Tampa Bay's First Negro Black Community, 1812-1821,” Tampa Bay
77 Boyd, “Horatio S. Dexter and Events,” 81.
producing cotton, tobacco, rice, and sugar cane.\textsuperscript{78} In 1818, two years after the destruction of the Negro Fort and one year before the signing of the treaty that ceded Florida to the United States, Captain James Gadsden advised Jackson that Tampa Bay had become “the last rallying spot” for British-allied blacks and Seminoles who had been driven out of northern Florida by American attacks. Gadsden argued that American possession of the territory would unite the peninsula “to the southern boundary of the United States,” thereby increasing U.S. control of the oceans, harbors, and waterways of the Gulf Coast and protecting the nation against incursions from “an external enemy.” As an excellent deepwater harbor situated midway on Florida’s western coast, Tampa Bay was a critical component of this coastal defense strategy, but only if the “disaffected negroes and Indians” who had gathered there could be removed.\textsuperscript{79}

An added benefit to American possession of Florida would be that rich lands for growing cotton and sugar would be made available to “enterprising agriculturalists.” The planters Gadsden and others sought to entice to settle in Florida would depend on enslaved labor to produce crops and on the development of roads, canals, and other terrestrial infrastructure to market their goods. As such, they were a different breed from those “adventurous class of emigrants” he later observed in the southeastern region of the peninsula who had little use for roads, preferring “to [make] use of those water channels and lakes provided by nature.”\textsuperscript{80}

From the outset of the Americanization of Florida, military endeavors to take control of the peninsula, such as that proposed by Gadsden, were motivated by intertwined interests in expanding capitalist investment and protecting the territory

\textsuperscript{78} See, for example, Baptist, \textit{Creating an Old South}. Schafer, “‘A Class of People Neither Freemen nor Slaves.’” Hugo L. Black, “Richard Fitzpatrick’s South Florida, 1822-1840, Part II: Fitzpatrick’s Miami River Plantation,” \textit{Tequesta} 41 (1981), 33-68.

\textsuperscript{79} James Gadsden, “The Defense of the Floridas,” \textit{Florida Historical Quarterly} 15 (April 1937): “last relaying spot of the disaffected Indians and negroes,” 248; the “possession of the Floridas…unites to the southern boundary of the United States a territory susceptible of strong defence,” 246; seacoast fortifications forming a “system of defences against an external enemy,” 244.

against foreign threats to security and commerce. Because their struggle to maintain independent existences posed the combination of these threats, “negroes and Indians”—though denizens of the territories already (or soon to be) occupied by the United States—were understood by dominant American political and commercial authorities as alien entities, outside the rubric of citizenship. Additional apprehension stemmed from the ability of these internal enemies of the American project to inhabit the coastal islands and swamps of the southern Gulf Coast and to navigate the wetlands, rivers, estuaries, and marine circuits of the southeastern Gulf of Mexico and the northern Caribbean Sea. To those who sought to connect Florida politically and culturally to the southern swath of the United States, the continent was made vulnerable by the ease with which “disaffected negroes and Indians” could traverse the transnational waterways of the southern region of the peninsula.81

After 1821, as the United States extended its control of the peninsula southward, rumors spread, with mounting alarm, about the extent and the intent of these ethnically hybrid, polyglot coastal settlements. Dexter reported having heard of “several settlements of refugee Negroes” along the coast between Tampa Bay and Charlotte Harbor, whose residents were said to be receiving Spanish arms, molasses, and rum in exchange for cattle. Armed vessels also were said to be transporting “refugee Negroes” to the West Indies.82 Indian agent Gad Humphreys echoed these claims, cautioning Secretary of War John C. Calhoun in 1825 about the “injurious tendency” of the commonplace waterborne travel by Indians between the southern peninsula and Cuba, claiming that by these means liquor and other goods were traded and fugitives from slavery were conveyed to the West Indies, either as free people or to be sold again into slavery.83

Though some officials believed that these reports of illicit activity were exaggerated, unconfirmed allegations about illicit trade in arms and ammunition

81 These points are inspired by Amy Kaplan’s analysis in The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of U.S. Culture (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002) of the discursive tensions within early twentieth century U.S. Supreme Court discussions over the status of Puerto Rico as a “liminal space both inside and outside the boundaries of the Constitution,” 3, and by Kirsten Silva Gruesz, “The Gulf of Mexico System and the ‘Latinness’ of New Orleans,” American Literary History 18 (Fall 2006), 468-495.
83 Humphreys to Calhoun, 2 March 1825, Territorial Papers vol. 23, 202-203.
continued to circulate. Like Dexter, U.S. Indian agent Wiley Thompson had been told that
an island in Charlotte Harbor had become home to “a lawless, motley crew” comprised of “negroes, Indians, and Spaniards.” Thompson warned Governor Duval that these “runaway slaves and refugees from justice” provided a “medium of intercourse” between Indians and Spanish traders based in Cuba. John Winslett, a white member of the Creek nation who was employed as a slave-catcher, was the source of the rumors that Thompson relayed. Winslett had previously informed Hillsborough County Justice of the Peace Augustus Steele that “a band of desperadoes, runaways, murderers, and thieves (negroes and Indians, a majority runaway slaves)” were living on a Charlotte Harbor island; in turn, Winslett had been told of this settlement by others who had visited it.84

Citizenship, Nation States, and Border-Crossing Fish(eries)

As rumors spread of the “motley crew” inhabiting south Florida during the 1820s and 1830s, Cuban and Spanish Indian participants in the mullet fisheries of the southern Gulf Coast became as suspect as Seminoles and African-descended people. In contrast to the British decision in the 1760s that these fisheries ultimately posed no threat to their political order, American authorities grew increasingly alarmed about the presence of people of undetermined nationality. On the one hand, Article Six of the Adams-Onís Treaty, through which Florida was transferred from Spain to the United States, clearly stated that those who inhabited the Florida territories should be “admitted to the enjoyment of all the privileges, rights and immunities of the Citizens of the United States.” On the other hand, the fisheries were prosecuted within the fluid space that connects Cuba and Florida. This biogeographical connectivity created networks of production, trade, and consumption that, since the signing of the Treaty, crossed

84 Thompson to William P. Duval, 1 January 1834 and Winslett to Augustus Steele, 21 December 1833, H. Doc. No. 271-24 at 7-9 (1834). See George Walton, Acting Governor of the Territory of Florida, to Thomas L. McKenney, Indian Affairs Office, War Department, 14 July 1825, Territorial Papers vol. 23, 282-283, for belief that reports about improper activities in Charlotte Harbor’s Spanish fishing establishments were “greatly exaggerated.” See also Hammond, “Spanish Fisheries,” 361.
85 “Message from the President of the United States, Transmitting a Copy of a Ratified Treaty of Amity, Settlement, and Limits, Between the United States of America and His Catholic Majesty,” H. Doc. No. 103-16 at 9 (1820).
international borders. So did the ethnically mixed groups of people engaged in the fisheries, people whose commitment to the project of a consolidated, continental United States was considered dubious. This commodity circuit, heavily based on mullet, thus created a quandary for American authorities in Florida who sought to delineate boundaries of belonging as well as of geopolitical demarcation and cadastre.

In 1825, for example, Colonel George M. Brooke, who had been sent to establish a military outpost in what was then the wilderness of southern Florida (and what is now Tampa), expressed consternation over the ambiguous relationship of rancho residents to the nation-state he was under oath to defend. The Spanish fishermen who inhabited the coastal zones southward from Tampa were, to be sure, “in the country the day the flags of the two nations changed hands,” which, Brooke recognized, made them “American citizens” per the stipulations of the Adams-Onís Treaty. Their actions, however, troubled their citizenship: while occupying lands within American boundaries, the people of the ranchos traded their fish directly with Havana and traded directly with Indians, purportedly exchanging liquor for hides, thus circumventing U.S. controls on commerce and revenue. Such practices, according to Brooke, classified the participants in the Spanish fisheries as “foreigners at heart” and he urged such people along with the Indians with whom they “traffick[ed]” to be placed “Exclusively under the control of the American government.” Once the region was cleared of these foreigners and Indians, Brooke envisioned settling the area with Anglo-American “emigrants from southern states” who could be enticed to cultivate sugar cane and other agricultural products.\footnote{Brooke to General Winfield Scott, 29 August 1825, \textit{Territorial Papers} vol. 23, 314. Brooke to the Commanding General, 3 February 1824, \textit{Territorial Papers} vol. 23, 845.} In doing so, southern emigrants would bring with them not only enslaved people but the white supremacist social order that was the bedrock for U.S. slavery.

Brooke’s concern over the movement of goods, revenue, and people through Caribbean commercial circuits that largely bypassed North American markets and political regimes was echoed by others engaged in transforming East and West Florida into a U.S. domain. William Worthington, Acting Governor of East Florida, reported in 1822 that eight or nine fishing vessels, “Americans under Spanish licence,” were catching grouper and conveying them live for sale in Havana markets, each vessel earning
between three and four hundred dollars per week. Worthington also noted that Bahamians, as citizens of England, were harvesting sea turtles in the region. The fisheries and turtling operations, he wrote, “should be put on a footing to ensure a monopoly or first preference to our own citizens.”\textsuperscript{87} This language suggests that, for Worthington at least, those “Americans” who engaged in commerce for or with other political powers were as much outside the rubric of U.S. citizenship as were foreign citizens.

As the status of Florida as a U.S. Territory became more established, not all Anglo-Americans in the region were equally disturbed by the presence of a populace and a social order that transgressed national boundaries and behavioral norms for U.S. citizenship. In his 1825 survey of the “very Swampy and wet” country of southwest Florida, Isaac Clark observed on the islands of Charlotte Harbor several fisheries populated and prosecuted by Spaniards and Indians. These people, he observed, lived in palmetto huts, “similar to the Indians,” and appeared harmless. After a period of negotiation, he obtained salt fish and one hundred pounds of “very bad” hard biscuit from them, and observed that they seemed to be “industrious and attend to their Fishery alone.”\textsuperscript{88} Six years later, Whitehead and Strobel were visiting some of these same ranchos, sipping coffee, smoking cigars, and enjoying good, white bread.

During this period, groups of Anglo-Americans increasingly engaged in the southwest Florida fisheries themselves. Since 1822, Key West had been designated an official port of entry, and the following year a revenue cutter was assigned to the district. This facilitated the collection of duties for the U.S. Treasury from the wrecking, fishing, and other maritime businesses that provided the economic foundation for the area. Such businesses also drew Anglo-American families and enterprises from New York, Connecticut, Virginia, and South Carolina to settle in the Keys. By 1829 about thirty Connecticut captains were in the habit of wintering with their vessels along the southern coast. Each small sloop would transport between five thousand and seven thousand

\textsuperscript{87} Worthington to Secretary of State John Quincy Adams, 18 March 1822, \textit{Territorial Papers} vol. 22, 382-383.

pounds of live grouper in their wells from Key West to Havana, with annual proceeds of about £20,000 to £25,000.  

The potential for further involvement of bona fide American captains in the Florida fisheries, and the consequent prospects for these enterprises to contribute to the financial coffers of the Territory, led the Legislative Council of the Territory of Florida in February 1832 to pass a bill titled “An act for the protection of the fisheries on the coast of Florida, and to raise revenue therefrom to this Territory.” The territorial committee that proposed the bill made clear that it placed “no restrictions upon our own citizens,” but rather was designed to “prevent the encroachments of foreigners.” Such restrictions were directed toward Bahamians seeking official permission to harvest sea turtles and fish in Florida waters, as well as toward Spanish fishermen—whether resident in Cuba or on the peninsula—who exported their catch of Florida mullet and other inshore species to Cuba and the West Indies.

A key provision in the bill was a $500 annual “privilege” fee on “every vessel not wholly and entirely owned and navigated by citizens of the United States” that engaged in “fishing or curing fish, or taking turtles” in the now-American waters surrounding the southern tip of the peninsula. Under the provisions of this act, fishery commissioners and their agents were entitled to board any vessel in Florida waters; if a license could not be produced, the vessel and its equipment and cargo were subject to seizure. Two years before President Andrew Jackson approved the Treaties of Payne’s Landing and Fort Gibson, which stipulated that all “Seminoles” in Florida be removed westward to Indian

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90 Statement of John P. Booth, Chairman of the Committee on the State of Territory, to the Legislative Council of Florida, February 8, 1832, H. Doc. 201, 6.
Territory, the fisheries act prohibited trading with or employing in the fisheries any of the “Indians on the coasts of Florida.”  

Proponents of the bill described Florida’s “piscary” as a “natural right” exclusive to “inhabitants of the adjacent coast.” By defining entitlement to harvest fishery resources in terms of residence along the bordering coasts, the Territorial Government asserted its localized authority to regulate inshore marine space, rather than the U.S. Congress. Broad national concerns were one motivation for legislating access to the local fisheries: foreigners should be excluded, for example, because they might expose the country to contagious diseases as well as to enemies seeking to excite “domestic disturbances.” The rationale for the bill, however, rested largely on promoting local interests—and, in the process, articulating a definition of “local” circumscribed by ethnicity. Fundamentally, the committee backing the bill considered the “property in these fisheries” to reside “exclusively in the people of Florida,” which meant that any regulation of these resources should “be done for the exclusive benefit of the inhabitants” of the territory as a component of their “privileges, rights, and immunities” as U.S. citizens.  

By subjecting resident Spaniards to the fines applied to foreigners and by excluding the “Spanish Indians” from the fisheries outright, the Florida Legislature affirmed the notion that these long-term denizens of the “adjacent coast” in question were inherent outsiders within American borders, thereby excluding them from citizenship.

A group of U.S. citizens residing in the “southern district” of the territory, the majority of them Anglo-American, petitioned the U.S. Congress to annul the bill, to no avail. The sixty-three petitioners pointed out that the inshore mullet and other fisheries contributed revenue to the U.S. Treasury and that the foreign participants in the fisheries,

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having lived in the region before, during, and after the change of flags, should have been qualified for U.S. citizenship. Furthermore, the petitioners noted, the law would be a source of “much annoyance and embarrassment,” as most of the vessels owned by Anglo-Americans citizens of the United States in southern Florida relied on people from throughout the maritime peripheries of the Caribbean and Gulf of Mexico as seasoned captains and fishery workers. 

William A. Whitehead, who served as the U.S. Customs Collector in Key West from 1830 to 1838, also objected to what he determined to be the “ultimate object” of the bill, which was to “drive [the Spanish] from our shores,” in part so that others could “fall heir to their business.” To explain his opposition to the bill, Whitehead pointed out that the deeper-water harvesting of live grouper that Yankee captains engaged in was distinct from the Spanish trade in salted mullet and other inshore fish in terms of targeted species, habitats frequented, gear used, geographical bases of operation, and buyers. The two fisheries therefore were entirely compatible, he argued. Only in 1832 had U.S. fishermen entered into the trade in salt mullet and other cured fish, but as the Cuban market for such products was immense, the long-established Spanish and Indian trade did not pose a threat to nascent American operations. Since the establishment of a U.S. Customs office in Key West, Whitehead emphasized, the Spanish fisheries had been paying duties on goods imported into the ranchos, had begun buying salt from U.S. merchants, and were paying “tonnage and light money” for vessel transportation of cured fish, fish roes, fish oil, and goods manufactured in the United States. Through the annual sale to Havana of between six thousand and eight thousand quintals of cured fish, they had contributed over $4,700 to the U.S. Treasury over the previous three years, exporting about $18,000 worth of fish and other goods.

93 “Petitions to Congress by Citizens of the Southern District,” March 26, 1832, Territorial Papers vol. 24, 681. See also William N. Thurston, “A Study of Maritime Activity in Florida in the Nineteenth Century” (PhD diss., Florida State University, 1972), 77-78.

Whitehead saw no cause for excluding from the American body politic those participants in the inshore fisheries who inhabited the islands and coastal regions of southwest Florida. Many of the *rancho* residents, he reasoned, had lived in what was now U.S. territory well before the transition from Spanish rule, some having been resident since 1785. Furthermore, they willingly submitted to territorial laws, were interested in becoming U.S. citizens, and reasonably understood that the Adams-Onís Treaty provisions granted them that status. Thus, Whitehead queried, “why should they be deprived of the rights which, but for their ignorance of our language, would have been *secured* to them by their becoming American citizens?” Additionally, for Whitehead, as for British Governor James Grant over a half a century previously, the economic activity generated by the fishery represented a vital component of the southwest Florida community and the loss of it “would be a great detriment to the district.”95 The sympathetic evaluation by this Anglo-American resident of Key West of a regional commodity flow, along with the social systems and “local consumption logics” it generated, stood at odds with the “larger regimes of value”96 as defined by U.S. officials representing higher levels of political authority.

**Dismantling the Ranchos**

The blurred ethnic and national boundaries that characterized southwest Florida’s mullet fisheries challenged the class and racial hierarchies that organized the economic and cultural systems of the expanding American state. On one level, the region’s inshore fisheries posed no obvious threat to the American goal of developing the peninsula’s plantation economy and its inherent ideological commitment to slavery. After all, the early nineteenth century trading networks between Florida and Cuba had developed within and through the dynamics of colonialism and plantation slavery. The salt mullet and other marine products that were produced and exported during this period helped to feed the enslaved people who were the labor behind the island’s late-eighteenth century and early-nineteenth century sugar boom.

95 Whitehead to White, H. Doc., No. 201, 2.
On another level, however, the world of the fishing ranchos and their surrounding communities of Seminoles and self-emancipated blacks existed on the margins of the broader capitalist system of the Atlantic World. Within the polyglot, multi-ethnic milieu of southern Florida, communities of free people, highly mobile and in possession (or need) of little property, had adapted to local environmental conditions and labored for themselves within a regional economy on the literal fringes of plantation systems that were expanding in Cuba and in the southeastern United States. Posing an alternative to American economic goals and occupying terrain within a region that was being eyed for development, the social systems of Florida’s southern Gulf Coast fishing ranchos thus were targeted for dismemberment.

Providing the rationale were the rumors that the fishing sites harbored foreigners; afforded cover for the smuggling of weapons and liquor to Indians and other rebels; and offered means of transportation for runaway blacks seeking escape as well as illicit trade in enslaved people. Though backed by little first-hand evidence, such speculations continued to circulate through the correspondence of government officials. Writing to Territorial Governor Richard K. Call in January 1836, Richard Fitzpatrick echoed earlier warnings that arms and ammunition destined for Seminole parties had been delivered by Spanish vessels to the Charlotte Harbor fishing ranchos, information that he had received third-hand. He also reported having seen a cargo-less Spanish schooner enter the Key West harbor, apparently en route from Tampa Bay or Charlotte Harbor, a circumstance to which he imputed rebellious activity. Describing the lack of adequate inspection of the fisheries, the controlling influence of the Havana-based fishing firm Bardias on the trade, the prevalence of Spaniards and “Seminole Indians” and dearth of U.S. citizens in the ranchos, and the Spaniards’ opposition to Indian removal, Fitzpatrick sought to convince the Territorial Government of the “the necessity of destroying those Spanish fisheries.”

In August of the same year, Call received a report from Captain James Armstrong of the U.S. transport schooner Motto, who had been told of the presence in Indian Key of a “large armed [Spanish] schooner…full of negroes, apparently not ironed.” Armstrong suggested that this indicated “the probability of the Indians receiving supplies from the

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Spaniards.” For Call, the reports from Fitzpatrick and Armstrong served as proof of the dangerous nature of the persistent “intercourse with Spanish traders.” This trade, he insisted to Secretary of War Lewis Cass and other federal officials involved in prosecuting the Second Seminole War, not only was a pipeline for Indian arms and ammunition, but also a pathway for the escape or foreign sale of “the negroes captured or seduced from our plantations.” Call and others represented the centuries-old connection of the coastal fisheries with Cuba as inherently threatening to the security of the territory.

Well before having received these reports, however, Call was convinced of the need to clear the coast of its ethnically mixed, Spanish-creole settlements. Five years previously, as assistant counsel in territorial land disputes, Call had written to the General Land Office in Washington, DC about the objectionable presence of Spanish fishing folk in Charlotte Harbor, advising that the region be cleared for settlement by having “the country run off in townships, by which means the character of the lands would be developed and wherever they may be found sufficiently valuable to warrant the expense they can afterwards be divided into sections and sold.” Such prospects for real estate development in South Florida depended on first clearing the land of its undesirables.

Fitzpatrick, who owned over three thousand acres of land along the Miami River and the New River on which fifty to sixty slaves cultivated sugar cane, corn and pumpkins, plantains and bananas, among other crops, also urged that south Florida be surveyed in advance of being partitioned and sold. The son of a wealthy and successful South Carolinian planter, Fitzpatrick made use of his legislative position to promote the “natural advantages” south Florida offered for developing large-scale tropical plantation systems. Call also owned large-scale plantations that relied heavily on the labor of enslaved people: by 1840, he owned sixty slaves and six thousand acres in northern Florida’s Leon County. The spread of plantation economies and social structures

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throughout the territory, of personal interest to politically powerful men like Call and Fitzpatrick, would be advanced by removing Spanish and Indian fishing folk from the coastline, actions for which both men successfully advocated on the basis of security concerns.

Contemporary newspapers took up the call to include the Spaniards and Spanish Indians of the ranchos within the ambit of removing Seminoles and rounding up fugitive blacks. In 1836, for example, the Pensacola Gazette warned its readers about dangerous “intercourse between the hostile Indians and the Spanish fishermen,” by means of which, they claimed, weapons and ammunition were being introduced to Florida. The paper urged the government to patrol the southwest coast with armed vessels, a course of action the U.S. Navy undertook, sometimes employing the U.S. Customs Revenue Cutters in such service.  

Earlier that year, the Floridian, a Tallahassee newspaper, published a lengthy letter from William Wyatt. A Marylander by birth who had settled in the Territory with his family and thirteen enslaved people, Wyatt had established the Third Regiment Florida Mounted Volunteers and had taken part in hostilities against the Seminole and black forces. As an owner and eventual trader of enslaved people, with plans to invest in Florida property and agriculture, Wyatt, along with Call and Fitzpatrick, found the existence of amalgamated communities of Latin, Indian, and free people of African descent to be incompatible with U.S. settlement, social structure, and eventual statehood.

Department of State:
http://www.floridamemory.com/photographiccollection/photo_exhibits/grove/.

101 M. Dickerson, Navy Department to Hon. Lewis Cass, Secretary of War, 18 May 18, 1836, in Pensacola Gazette, June 25, 1836, 3. For an official request that revenue cutters patrol the coast between Charlotte Harbor and Tampa Bay, see extract of letter from General D.L. Clinch to General Jones, 8 October 1835, American State Papers (ASP), Senate, Military Affairs, vol. 7, 307. See Pensacola Gazette, March 12, 1836, 3, for recommendations that the U.S. Government use Revenue Cutters to assist in “cutting off all intercourse between the Indians and the fishermen of the West Indies, as well as in transporting troops from point to point along the peninsula.”

102 Matthews, Edge of Wilderness, 137-138, 146.

103 For details about Wyatt as a political actor, see Matthews, Edge of Wilderness, 137-148. For details about Wyatt’s sale of enslaved people in Florida to Alabama planters, see
Writing on the heels of the December 28, 1835 ambush of Major Francis Dade’s troops by combined Indian and black forces in central Florida, in which one hundred-eight U.S. troops were killed, Wyatt described the Seminole threat in dire terms. The peninsula, he wrote, could not be rendered safe “until the Indians are finally gotten out of the Territory.” Wyatt claimed to have met Indians along the coast who knew “nothing about any white people except the Spaniards.” Within these “intermixed” coastal populations, many of the Spaniards had “Squaws for wives,” employed “Indian men and half breeds” as fishermen and navigators, and provided shelter and means of escape for the Seminoles and “their negroes” alike. According to Wyatt, Indian removal depended in part on “break[ing] up all communication between them and these Spanish fishermen, and our runaway negroes.”

Like Gadsden, Wyatt emphasized the necessity of establishing comprehensive U.S. control of the southern coastal boundaries of the peninsula.

As what was to become known as the Second Seminole War heated up, pressure mounted to prevent Florida from continuing to function as an ethnically hybrid cultural landscape that provided a safe haven for self-emancipated blacks. Soon after having been placed in command of U.S. army forces in Florida in December 1836, Major General Thomas Jesup famously summarized the bottom-line of his mission this way: “This, you may be assured, is a negro, not an Indian war; and if it be not speedily put down, the south will feel the effects of it on their slave population before the end of the next season.” As the guerilla war bogged down, Jesup increasingly conveyed skepticism about the goals of the campaign, as well as frustration that the slaveholding citizens of Florida were pressuring him to convert “the army into negro-catchers,” a mission he was unwilling to undertake, “particularly for the benefit of those who are afraid to undertake the recapture of their property themselves.”

Jespü’s objections notwithstanding, a primary motivation for the U.S. military campaigns directed against the Seminoles and

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105 Jesup to Secretary of War B.F. Butler, 9 December 1836 and Jesup to Secretary of War J.R. Poinsett, 8 May 1837, ASP, House, Military Affairs, vol. 7, 821, 870.
their black allies remained: replacing the region’s blurred racial and ethnic boundaries with a clear-cut, American-style caste system.

The communities clustered throughout southwest Florida’s estuarine coastline, for which mullet had long provided a foundation, were prime sites for disbanding. In their defense of the ethnically mixed population of the ranchos, Whitehead and several other Anglo-American residents of southwestern Florida rejected a simple binary opposition between white, English-speaking residents of the territory and everyone else. Responding to Wyatt’s claims that had been published in the *Floridian*, Whitehead stated flatly in a letter published by the *Key West Inquirer* that the allegations that the Seminoles were receiving arms and ammunition via the Charlotte Harbor fisheries trade with Cuba had “no foundation whatever.” No friend of the Seminoles, Whitehead referred to them as “Savages” and “the enemy,” distinguishing these “hostile Indians” from the Charlotte Harbor rancho residents, Spanish and Indian alike. The editor of the paper, Jesse Atkinson, supported Whitehead’s conclusions, backing them up with information obtained from a recent Army survey of the islands. Atkinson supported Wyatt’s call for coastal block houses and naval patrols, but “not from any fear of ‘Spanish fishermen,’ ” whom he believed were few in number and posed no threat. These arguments were little heeded. The fishing ranchos of southwest Florida had little power to resist the determination of the U.S. government to convert the peninsula into a territory that would be safe for the spread of plantation agriculture and slavery.¹⁰⁶

**William Bunce and the Demise of the Ranchos**

The ranchos operated by William Bunce provide the best-known example of the clash between territorial communities adapted to the environmental conditions of southwest Florida, and the contrasting demands of the centralized U.S. state backed by its military might. A Baltimore captain of the coastwise trade who had traversed the waters between that port city and Philadelphia and New York, Bunce settled in Key West in 1824 at the age of twenty-nine. There he operated a large trading center and immersed himself in various southwestern Florida maritime and real estate enterprises. Through

these activities, Captain Bunce gained practical experience in traversing the Straits of Florida and the Gulf of Mexico as well as the labyrinthine, shoal waters of the region’s mangrove-studded coast. Bunce also gained public regard. In 1832, he was one of several prominent Anglo-Americans in the region to be appointed customs inspector in Key West. Two years later, Bunce was appointed Justice of the Peace for the newly created Hillsborough County, a district that was created through the lobbying efforts of a business associate, Augustus Steele. This Gulf Coast district stretched from about forty miles north of Tampa, southward an additional hundred miles to Charlotte Harbor, thus embracing much of the coastal region within which the southwest Florida fishing *ranchos* had long operated.107 Having served as a navigational pilot for American entrepreneurs surveying the southwest coast for investment opportunities, as well as for military expeditions in the region, Bunce was described by a U.S. Army lieutenant as “one of the most intelligent men on the coast.” In 1839, as a Hillsborough County delegate to the Constitutional Convention, he was one of the signers of the territorial constitution.108

By the fall of 1834, Bunce had established a large fishing *rancho* near the mouth of the Manatee River, on a site that had housed a previous fishing community. In contrast to those American captains who pushed the territorial government to pass restrictions against foreign participation in the fisheries, Bunce incorporated himself into the existing dimensions of the Cuba-oriented trade, working with experienced participants in the fisheries such as Manuel Olivella, Phillipi Bermudez, and Maximo Hernandez. Adopting


the practices of long-term fishing operations, such as that of José Caldez, Bunce ran a number of vessels between the southwestern coast of Florida and Cuba. Among Bunce’s vessels was the *Enterprise*, a forty-five-ton Connecticut-built sloop owned by his partner Fielding Browne, in which he hauled salt mullet and other species to Havana, returning with supplies for his *rancho*, as well as goods on consignment for other merchants and settlers along Florida’s Gulf Coast. The growing fleet of commercial vessels and the enterprises in which they were engaged were owned by Cubans, Florida Spaniards or Anglo Americans, and generally were captained by Spanish-creole old salts, with many years of experience plying the region’s waters.109

Business boomed for Bunce’s *rancho* during its first year of operation. For harvesting and processing the fish, Bunce relied primarily on those who had been laboring in the inshore mullet fisheries for generations: Spaniards and Spanish Indians. Some *rancho* residents had been born at the site, and had been living there long enough to be raising grandchildren: presumably it was they who taught Bunce what he needed to know about the inshore mullet net-fisheries. A well-known man of African descent, Luis Pacheco, worked for a time in the *rancho* and at other trading post enterprises along the Manatee River, and other blacks worked in Bunce’s and other area *ranchos* as well.110

The captain appeared to have been intent on enhancing the permanence and scale of his enterprise. Manuel Olivella, who was to become postmaster and Clerk of Court of Hillsborough County, later estimated that Bunce invested about eight thousand dollars in buildings, vessels, and gear at the Manatee River site. The approximately one hundred

109 Matthews, *Edge of Wilderness*, 76-77. Almy, “Ranchos of Southwest Florida,” 16-17. The site of Bunce’s first *rancho* would have been in close proximity to (and possibly exactly conterminous with) Angola, the large black settlement that was attacked in 1821 by a Lower Creek raid.

110 For a summary of Luis Pacheco’s long and complex life history, including his associations with the Charlotte Harbor and Sarasota Bay-area fisheries, see Alcione M. Amos, *The Life of Luis Fatio Pacheco: Last Survivor of Dade’s Battle* (Dade City, Florida: Seminole Wars Foundation, 2006). For direct evidence of other blacks in the fisheries, see for example Janet Matthews’ documentation of Major General Jesup’s 1838 employment of Antonio, a “Seminole Negro” who was a fisherman at Bunce’s rancho, as a spy on his employer. Matthews, *Edge of Wilderness*, 98. See Almy, “Ranchos of Southwest Florida,” 41, for documentation and analysis of the remains of a man of “mixed European and African descent” at a Sarasota site likely to have been the location of the Phillippi Bermudez *rancho*. 
and fifty fishermen Bunce employed, Olivella gathered, were generating about five to six thousand dollars of net proceeds annually. For the rancho’s “comfortable dwellings,” Bunce relied on the vernacular architecture of the region: “circular huts thatched with palmetto, both the roof and sides,” eventually adding planked floors and wooden doors to the palmetto-thatched dwelling he lived in, and establishing blacksmith and carpenter shops as well as a store. The U.S. Army surgeon who observed these details likened the rancho to a small, American town. It was, however, an American town with a distinctly Creole flavor; and therein would lie the rub.

As they strived to continue their business operations in the midst of war, the residents of the Tampa Bay fishing ranchos cooperated with U.S. military attempts to forcibly evict the Seminoles to Indian Territory west of the Mississippi. Bunce provided navigational services for the military, as did Spanish Indian employees of the ranchos, who served as marine pilots and as guides through coastal lands. Complementing these concrete acts of alignment with U.S. policies, rhetorical assertions by Bunce situated the multi-ethnic fishery workers and their families as distinct from the Seminoles and therefore within the ambit of U.S. citizenship. Rancho Indians in southwestern Florida, Bunce explained, spoke Spanish (rather than the Muscogee or Miccosukee spoken by the Seminoles), lived along the coast, and had no familiarity with the interior of the country. Furthermore, they depended on small garden plots and cast netting for mullet for subsistence, had intermarried with “white Spaniards” for generations, and relied exclusively on “fishing with the different Spanish companies” for their livelihoods. Thus, he implored Indian agent General Wiley Thompson, he hoped the Government would permit the fishery to continue to operate at least through the end of the season.

Judge Augustus Steele, who was also the Customs inspector for Hillsborough County and postmaster for Tampa Bay, elaborated these points, suggesting that the

specific geographical origins, inherited customs, and legal treatment of the rancho populations of the southern coasts of Florida positioned them closer to Spaniards than to Indians. “They were Spanish fishermen under the Spanish Government of Florida,” Steele explained to Thompson. As such, the judge implied, they legally ought to be “permitted to expatriate” from Spain to the United States: American jurisprudence did not prohibit foreigners from obtaining citizenship, in contrast to “British national law,” which at the time stipulated that natural-born citizenship was indefeasible. Furthermore, Steele maintained, the Spanish Indians were not recognized legally or culturally as Seminoles, even though, he supposed, they were descended from them: they did not receive the payments allocated by the U.S. Government to the Florida Indians, were not subject to Indian laws, and were “entirely identified by habit, occupation, and intermarriage with people of another nation, of different pursuits and modes of life.” To drive these people from the fisheries therefore would deprive them of their only source of income, as they were “incapable of supporting themselves by ordinary Indian means.”

The argument posed by the Spanish Indians and their supporters, in short, was that to work in the fisheries meant that one was not an Indian as commonly understood in territorial Florida. The judge reasoned that “the measures and regulations with regard to Indians, cannot with propriety be extended” to the Spanish Indians of the ranchos. Additional proof that they were not “considered as Indians” was the employment of several of the rancho residents as registered seamen for the U.S. Revenue Service. Through these positions, Steele, Bunce, Whitehead, and the rancho residents themselves posited a notion of belonging to the state based on place-specific occupations, custom, and kinship affiliations rather than on racial and ethnic attributes. To be sure, this stance affirmed the ineligibility of those considered to be bona fide Indians for U.S. citizenship, and was far from an ideological rejection of racial classification as a basis for determining civic status and rights. Nevertheless, the position of the rancho advocates

114 Steele to Thompson, 10 January 1835, H. Doc., 271, p. 83.
posed a subtle challenge to the white supremacist racial binaries characteristic of the dominant political and economic classes in early American Florida.

Having heard rumors of impending Seminole attack, presumably in response to the fishery workers’ assistance to the American forces, Bunce relocated the rancho in the spring of 1836 from the mainland Manatee River site, first to Passage Island at the southwestern mouth of Tampa Bay, and subsequently to the deeper waters of Mullet Key. According to Olivella, Bunce invested up to fifteen hundred dollars in his second rancho. Following a Seminole raid on the Caldez fishery in Charlotte Harbor in April of that year—which left customs inspector Harry Crews dead and his home destroyed—refugees from the southern fishery fled northward to Bunce’s establishment, the population of which grew to over one hundred-sixty. Captain Mervin P. Mix, commander of the USS Concord, a sloop-of-war assigned to the West India Squadron and stationed in Tampa Bay, ordered two vessels, including a launch equipped with a twelve pound howitzer, to assist and protect the Charlotte Harbor rancho residents in the journey to Tampa Bay. With the advice and assistance of the U.S. Navy, the Charlotte Harbor fishery workers settled first in Sarasota and then on Passage Island, the site of Bunce’s reestablished rancho. In the Key West Inquirer, Atkinson and Whitehead argued that the fear towards the Seminoles on the part of the Charlotte Harbor fishery workers, Spanish and Indian alike, demonstrated that “no collusion…between them and the savages” existed in the form of provision of weapons or assistance in escaping.115

During the first several months of 1836, U.S. military presence along the peninsula’s southwestern coast intensified, as American efforts to force the Seminoles out of Florida were pursued with renewed zeal following the December 1835 ambush of Major Dade’s troops. Throughout the bays, estuaries, and inland waterways of southwest Florida, the U.S. Navy deployed schooners, revenue cutters, and canoes to patrol the coast and to destroy Seminole settlements. Within this climate, the arguments that Spanish and Spanish Indian members of the fisheries were legitimate residents of southwest Florida had an uneven reception. Captain Mix referred to the Charlotte Harbor refugees—who included Spaniards and Spanish Indians, probably people of African

descent, and no Anglo-Americans—as “American inhabitants” and “American citizens,” ordering his troops to “treat them with great kindness.” In September, as the mullet were running, Bunce expressed gratitude for the protection the fisheries received from the U.S. schooners that anchored in close proximity to the ranchos in order to protect the establishments from Seminole attack.\(^{116}\)

Close relations existed between the rancho residents and the naval troops: the former supplied the latter with fresh fish, and the troops frequented the springs on the rancho islands to barbeque, do laundry and supply their vessels with fresh water, sometimes trying their hand at hauling a seine themselves. At the same time, members of the ranchos, including Bunce, increasingly became objects of surveillance, even as they continued to harvest mullet and to serve as guides for the U.S. military. In response to rumors of rancho collusion with the Seminoles, American officials routinely boarded the canoes and smacks engaged in the mullet fishery.\(^{117}\) Protection and inspection went hand in hand.

Several months into his command of the army in Florida, Major General Jesup understood that an essential obstacle to persuading the Seminoles to emigrate westward voluntarily was the American insistence on separating the Indians from their black allies and delivering the latter to those slaveholders who claimed them as property. Jesup recognized that people of African descent possessed respectable social standing within Seminole bands and performed important functions as linguists and counselors. The “negroes rule the Indians,” he noted repeatedly in his correspondence, adding that “the two races, the negro and the Indian, are rapidly approximating; they are identified in


interest and feeling.” Suggesting to his superiors that hostilities would cease if these fugitives “were allowed to remain in the country even as citizens,” Jesup realized quite early in his command that the Seminoles and blacks alike would fight to the death rather than accept expatriation from the space of relative freedom they had constructed in the Florida peninsula.\footnote{118 Jesup to Brigadier General R. Jones, 26 March 1837. Jesup to Secretary of War Joel R. Poinsett, 16 June 1837. Jesup to Secretary of War B.F. Butler, 17 February 1837, ASP, House, Military Affairs, vol. 7, 835, 876, 832.}

Disregarding these first-hand insights, Washington officials ordered the Major General to bring the war to a close through the route of forced emigration. Continually frustrated in his attempts to convince sizable groups of Seminoles to emigrate, Jesup began to suspect that encouragement to resist removal was coming from sources in addition to the African-descended people associated with the Indians. In April 1837, Jesup was said to have had “reason to believe that the interference of unprincipled white men” might persuade the Indians to refuse to leave the territory, out of fear that they would lose their “negro property.” In attempt to forestall this rumored interference, Jesup issued orders prohibiting any white men without military connections from entering the southern portion of the peninsula and requiring the inspection of all merchant and transport vessels sailing into Tampa Bay along with the registration of all people aboard.\footnote{119 Orders, No. 79, Tampa Bay, April 5, 1837, H. Doc., No. 225-25 (1839).} The first order would seem to have been ludicrously unenforceable. Subsequent events suggest that the second may have been directed specifically toward Bunce.

In June 1837, following the dramatic escape of about seven hundred Seminoles who had gathered in Tampa Bay ostensibly in readiness to emigrate, a humiliated Jesup intimated to Secretary of War Joel Poinsett that Bunce had directly inveigled the Indians to resist removal, and may have encouraged them to continue their attacks on U.S. forces and settlements. Based on third-hand reports of a conversation said to have occurred months earlier, the Major General purported that Bunce had warned the Indians and their black allies that the intention of “the whites” was to send the Indians “away off to a very bad country, where all of your old people and children will die.” Although this talk between “Indians and negroes…[was] no testimony that would convict a white man,”
Jesup wrote, Bunce ought to be “removed from the country” should the losing effort to force the Seminoles out of Florida continue.120

While Bunce was not removed (and Jesup soon admitted that “he may be entirely innocent”), many of the rancho inhabitants were. About thirty troops from the Tampa Bay squadron raided the fishing community, seizing over one hundred men, women, and children for questioning. Though they were released, at least for a time, the buildings at Bunce’s first rancho at the mouth of the Manatee River were burned to the ground in the summer of 1837 by members of the West India Squadron stationed in Tampa Bay, the same troops that had been protecting the ranchos and their residents.

Bunce, who had moved the rancho on Mullet Key back to Passage Island, closer to shore, was able to continue the fishery operations for a time. A man of standing in the community, soon to be elected delegate to the Territorial Constitutional Convention, he evidently expected that his establishment would continue to be able to function. At his new settlement, Bunce had a frame house built for himself, and had bought a fishing smack and sloop. The rancho community—including the Charlotte Harbor refugees—planted crops and built forty palmetto-thatched homes, a store, and facilities for processing fish and repairing vessels. With their long roots in southwest Florida’s waters and coastlines, these fishing folk, too, had some reason to expect that they would be able to continue to practice their profession.121

Jesup’s general suspicions of the participants in the Tampa Bay fisheries, and of Bunce in particular, continued to mount, however. In January 1838, a captured Seminole reported that he had fished for the American rancho operator in the past and had exchanged deer skins for gun powder at the fishing establishment the previous winter. The people of the ranchos, Jesup wrote Colonel Zachary Taylor, had played a large role in convincing the Seminoles to refuse to emigrate, and he increasingly was convinced that Bunce had been responsible for the Indians’ escape the previous summer.122

120 Jesup to Poinsett, Tampa Bay, 15 June 1837, H. Doc., No. 78-25 at 160-167 (1838).
121 Testimonies of Olivella to Lee, May 6, 1844 and Fielding Browne to Stephen Mallory, 3 April 1844 in Dodd, “Captain Bunce’s Tampa Bay Fisheries,” 251-253. Matthews, Edge of Wilderness, 98.
Shortly before being relieved of command in April 1838 (per his request), Jesup ordered the Indians of Bunce’s rancho to be forcibly moved westward. While most of the men of the community were absent, presumably out fishing, about one hundred and fifty women, children, and some men were captured by American soldiers. The fishery workers protested against the seizure, insisting that marriages between Spaniards and Indians were legally recognized in Spanish Florida and Cuba and that many of the children had been baptized and educated in Cuba, all of which were grounds for claiming U.S. citizenship. Jesup and other U.S. military officials disregarded these arguments, separated the fishing families, and shipped the captives first to New Orleans and then to the Arkansas Territory.123

Two years later, General Armistead, the latest in the series of commanders of U.S. forces in Florida, ordered U.S. Army Captain S.M. Plummer to raze the last of Bunce’s ranchos. A detachment of troops aboard the steamer Thomas Salmond burned the thirty to forty homes, trading post, processing facilities, and wharves on the island. Manuel Olivella and other rancho residents present at the demolition were not allowed to rescue their crops and other property and, when ordered to assist in the destruction, refused. Olivella and others testified that the troops informed them that the rancho was being destroyed to “prevent liquor smugglers from harboring there,” rather than from misconduct on the part of Bunce or other fishery workers.124 Although Armistead justified his orders five years after the act by claiming that the rancho buildings provided cover for “a party of renegade Spaniards” who had intercourse with “the savage bands” he was fighting, the General also did not accuse Bunce of any misconduct. After signing the Territorial Constitution in 1839, Bunce disappeared from the historical record; in 1842, Jesup referred to him as the “late Captain William Bunce, of Tampa Bay.” Posthumously, his estate was awarded one thousand dollars compensation.125

124 Testimonies of Olivella [or Oliguela, sic] to Lee and John J.W. Weise to Justice of the Peace J.G. Putnam, 3 May 1844 in Dodd, “Captain Bunce’s Tampa Bay Fisheries,” 251-255. Covington, “Trade Relations.”
The Spanish and Spanish Indian families whose lives were sundered were not compensated, and their grievances were left unaddressed. Soon after the seizure of their wives, children, and friends, twenty-one of the fishermen at Bunce’s rancho wrote to Secretary of War Poinsett, pleading that the removal order be rescinded. As Whitehead, Bunce, and Steele had argued, the mullet fishermen maintained that their maritime avocation and their inhabitation of the coasts rather than interior of Florida rendered them a distinct “class,” united for “common defense” and engaged in “service to the country”—by which they meant the United States—and therefore separate from “their enemies,” the Indians. The men described themselves as “lawful citizens of the United States” who had, since the Adams-Onís Treaty, “exercised the right of sufferage [sic] and all other privileges and immunities of American citizens.” Citing the Key West Customs Service’s recognition of them as registered American Seaman and their assistance to the military as pilots, guides, and surveyors, the fishermen claimed inclusion for themselves and their ethnically mixed families in the American body politic. Their letter appears to have gone unanswered.

Replacing Hybridity with Hierarchy

The forced exodus of the Spanish Indian members of Florida’s mullet fisheries in 1838 and the razing of Bunce’s ranchos in 1840 were episodes within the broader ethnic violence of the Seminole Wars. The fundamental goal of these campaigns was to terminate the existence of a broad cultural geography of refuge, bounded by permeable maritime edges, at the southeastern perimeter of the expanding nation of the United States. In 1819, the signing of the Adams-Onís Treaty sealed the legal transfer of Florida from Spain to the United States. However, the work of circumscribing the region with U.S. political and economic borders additionally involved restructuring the social dynamics of the place in order to facilitate the spread of slave-based plantation agriculture. Eliminating the ability of the Florida frontier to function as a space of relative freedom for those who resisted the spread of Anglo-American colonialism was essential

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if the U.S. two-caste racial binary between whites and people of color was to operate without obstruction.

Fisheries operated by amalgamated communities of people of African, Indian, and European descent destabilized the process of imposing U.S. structures of class and race relations on the erstwhile Spanish region. As a natural creature and a commodity, the life of mullet illustrated the longstanding biogeographic and cultural connectivity between Florida waters and the northern Caribbean rim. Members of the ethnically hybrid world fostered by this border-crossing ecology and commerce, _rancho_ residents maintained that their cultural and juridical status as Americans of Spanish rather than Indian descent was confirmed by their voluntary acts of affiliation with the United States. Assistance to the U.S. military, combined with customary adaptations to the coastal environment, they argued, proved that they belonged in and to American Florida. By violently rejecting these assertions of citizenship, members of U.S. political and military institutions helped elaborate what it meant to be “American” in terms that emphasized conformity to dominant economic systems and social structures. Notions of belonging based on voluntary affiliation and cultural adaptation had no place within the white supremacist social order upon which Florida’s new American identity was predicated.

By the time the U.S. Fish Commission began investigating southern fishing grounds and fishing folk in the late 1870s, Florida had become a state (1845), had been the third of the Confederate states to secede, and had been readmitted to the Union for about a decade (since 1868). The absence of people that Captain Collins perceived in Tampa Bay in 1885 reflected this relatively recent history. What he could not see, because it had been so brutally erased, were the preceding centuries of cultural amalgamation and maritime-based hybridity that the peninsula’s southwestern mullet fisheries had generated. U.S. Fish Commissioner Spencer Baird’s 1884 expectation of finding “entirely American” crews in the country’s southern fisheries was a product of the erasure of this history.

Ultimately, the violent suppression of the liminal cultural world of the mullet fisheries naturalized a system wherein the control of access to resources was structured by hierarchies of race and class. This set the stage for elaborating an instrumentalist ideology pertaining to Florida’s waterways and fisheries, an ideology that linked the
meaning of America—its territory and its people—to the advancement of capitalist market economies. Within this economic and social order, commercial fishing was secondary to agricultural production; and within the lesser realm of fishing, the production of mullet reflected the degraded social identities of those who relied on it for sustenance and income. Operating under the logic of the national marketplace, Florida fisheries under American rule would continue to subordinate the humble mullet and its regional systems of production and consumption relative to other, more fittingly capitalist species of fish. The hunt was on for species that could be integrated into national markets, generate wealth, and help elevate the social stature of those who harvested and ate them.

In search of a species that could be marketed throughout the nation as a commodity born from—and productive of—progress and efficiency, the U.S. Fish Commission turned to the deeper water red snapper, rather than the humble, inshore mullet. In American Florida, commercial fishing was also secondary, and in some ways threatening, to the three Rs that soon came to dominate the promotional discourse that sold what Florida had to offer to the nation: real estate, recreation, and rejuvenation. These topics are the focus of the next two chapters.
CHAPTER 2
FISHING FOR RESPECTABILITY:
RED SNAPPER IN LATE NINETEENTH CENTURY FLORIDA

The Mullets—Mugil Albula: “The Mullet is probably the most generally popular and the most abundant fish of our whole southern seaboard…During the fall they move in such immense schools that the noise of their splashing in the water resembles distant thunder and to persons living near the river or bay, their noise, kept up day and night, becomes very annoying…Mullet are as plentiful as formerly, according to the general opinion of the fishermen of the coast.”

Silas Stearns127

The Red Snapper—Lutjanus Blackfordii: “…has but recently become known in Northern markets…Red Snappers from Florida…are shipped to New York, Washington, and Baltimore in winter, the supply in these cities being derived chiefly from Pensacola. Mobile and New Orleans consume considerable quantities, and from these ports they are shipped up the Mississippi River to the principal cities along its line, where the fish is growing to be a staple of much importance. In Saint Louis it is already one of the most highly esteemed food-fishes.”

George Brown Goode128

Introduction
When Silas Stearns moved from Maine to Pensacola in 1875 and began to study the fisheries of Florida, he was searching for the means to make his way in the world; likewise, the town was in the midst of reformulating its American identity. One of many travelers, entrepreneurs, and researchers who visited Florida from Northern states in the decades following the Civil War, Stearns participated in the process of rebuilding the state’s social and economic structure. Though he was not born in the place he came to call home, those who knew him were sure that he had been born to his intellectual and business endeavors. As his brother-in-law, Andrew Warren, put it upon the young man’s early death in 1888, Stearns discovered “his life work” within “the broad bays and sounds of West Florida…waters [upon which] he was entirely at home.”129 Within three years of

his arrival in Pensacola, he had become a well-respected field researcher for the Smithsonian Institution and the recently established United States Commission of Fish and Fisheries (often referred to as the U.S. Fish Commission or USFC).

Stearns soon grew to be the primary agent through which Florida’s west coast fish and marine spaces became known to the centralizing scientific establishment in the United States. By the time of his death, Stearns and Warren also had established their own fish wholesaling company, specializing in red snapper (*Lutjanus campechanus*), a species hitherto little known to northern markets, consumers, and researchers. Along with other fish dealers, Warren and Company helped circulate red snapper as a high quality southern food fish within northern markets, which put Pensacola on the national map as the center for the harvesting and distribution of this deep-water Gulf of Mexico fish.\footnote{Silas Stearns, “The Red-Snapper Fishery and the Havana Market Fishery of Key West, Florida,” in *The Fisheries and Fishery Industries of the United States*, ed. George Brown Goode. (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1887), Section V, Vol. I, Part X, 585-594. Jason T. Raupp, “Pensacola’s Red Snapper Fishery,” *Florida Historical Quarterly* 85, (Winter 2007), 324-341.}

During those post-Civil War years, mullet also made its presence known to those who visited Florida with an interest in fish and fisheries. Although many of the ethnically mixed fishing *ranchos* that had developed under Spanish rule had been dismembered, mullet fishing continued to occupy dispersed, coastal populations of people in Florida throughout the nineteenth century. Long a staple food fish in the region, mullet (*Mugil cephalus*)\footnote{As a result of the sometimes contentious process of fish taxonomy and nomenclature, the Latin names for snappers, mullets, and other species have gone through many changes over the past couple of centuries. *Lutjanus campechanus* has been the accepted name for Gulf of Mexico red snapper since 1966, but *L. blackfordii* and *L. aya* were frequently used for this species in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Joseph E. Tashiro, “Annotated Bibliography and Subject Indices for Western Atlantic Snappers (Lutjanidae),” *NOAA Technical Memorandum* (October 1979), 3. *Mugil cephalus* has been the accepted scientific nomenclature for striped or black mullet found in the Gulf of Mexico since at least 1896, but in the 1870s and 1880s *M. albula* frequently was applied} remained an abundant inshore species, especially along the southern Gulf...
Coast of the peninsula. As the epigraph suggests, towards the close of the nineteenth century the fall runs of mullet—when the fish bunch up into schools and move en masse offshore to spawn in response to passing cold fronts—were enormous and so loud, resembling distant thunder, that people often heard the leaping fish before catching sight of them. During the latter decades of the nineteenth century, many travelers to Florida noticed the predominance of mullet in the diets and economy of the area, and indeed throughout the southeastern United States. In the 1877 Annual Report of the U.S. Fish Commission, Spencer F. Baird (the institution’s first Commissioner), described the species as among the most important of the nation’s fisheries, “destined to rival the mackerel in industrial and commercial value.”

Along with cod, mackerel, halibut, alewife, menhaden, and bluefish, mullet was among the economically significant food fishes about which the USFC sought information in its early years.

Created by Congress in 1871 due to the initiative of Baird, who was assistant-secretary of the Smithsonian at the time, the USFC was the first federal organization to oversee the research and management of the nation’s aquatic resources as a whole. The mission of the Fish Commission was to provide comprehensive information to the federal government regarding the conditions of the nation’s fisheries. This involved basic biological and oceanographic research, including mapping water depths, assessing habitats, measuring salinity and temperature, and inventorying aquatic flora and fauna. From the inception of this institution, the research agenda was linked to the political goal of improving the supply of “economic forms” of the nation’s food fishes, accomplished by using scientific approaches—including aquaculture—to increase the productive capacity and marketability of particular aquatic organisms.

For the USFC and its


For “economic forms” language see any of the USFC Annual Reports from the 1870s and 1880s, e.g., USFC, “Report of the Commissioner, Introductory Note,” in Report of the Commissioner for 1886 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1889), x. See also Joseph Taylor, Making Salmon: An Environmental History of the Northwest Fisheries Crisis (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1999). Mary Carmel Finley,
sibling institutions, the Smithsonian and the United States National Museum (USNM), the greatest good that U.S. marine space and the people who engaged in it could provide was to generate revenue, provide jobs, and enhance national stature on the world stage.

With over a thousand miles of coast, Florida’s waterways held great potential in the minds of those in the late nineteenth century who dreamed about the employment, markets, food, and profits to be created out of the nation’s seas. The Treasury Department’s 1886 *Report on the Internal Commerce of the United States*, for example, repeated a U.S. Fish Commission assertion that “the time would come when mullet fishing alone in Florida would equal the cod-fishing interests of New England.” When it came to transforming the biological, economic, and social potential of Florida’s waterways into nationally significant industries, however, mullet never quite made the grade. Red snapper, on the other hand, was transformed from a regionally popular but nationally obscure food fish into a species that was highly regarded by consumers throughout the nation.

In this chapter, I examine contrasting USFC representations of the social and cultural worlds associated with red snapper and mullet in West Florida during the late nineteenth century. The classification systems developed by the USFC and employed by Stearns and others did not erase mullet—as a food, as the base of a system of production, and as a core feature of social and cultural systems—from the national patrimony. As economic-cum-cultural systems based on itinerant, household-centered modes of


134 Depending on what features are included and how they are measured, many figures are given for the length of Florida’s coastline. Estimates range from 1,260 to 1,350 miles of linear coast (measuring the general outline of the shoreline from the Georgia border, around the Keys, and up the Gulf coast to the western border with Alabama) to 8,460 miles of tidally-influenced shoreline (which includes barrier islands, estuaries, inlets, bays, and sounds). See for example “Florida Assessment of Coastal Trends, 2010,” Florida Department of Environmental Protection, Florida Coastal Management Program (Tallahassee 2010). Gary R. Knight, Jon Oetting, and Lou Cross, eds., *Atlas of Florida’s Natural Heritage: Biodiversity, Landscapes, Stewardship, and Opportunities* (Tallahassee: Florida State University, Institute of Science and Public Affairs, 2011).

production, however, Florida’s inshore mullet fisheries were represented as belonging to the backward past and therefore out of step with the forward march of American civilization. Red snapper, in contrast, possessed several attributes that matched what Fish Commission personnel were looking for in their efforts to improve the nation’s fish and fisheries. Inhabiting deeper waters of the Gulf of Mexico, the species drew fishermen and researchers alike into previously obscure aquatic domains. The commercial and scientific investigation of such realms stimulated the development of more sophisticated vessels and equipment in the region, which helped modernize the methods of both harvesting and research. Access to deep-water banks helped unveil a broad range of unfamiliar species, providing researchers with large collections of marine fauna to identify and classify, which enhanced the reputation of individual scientists and the nation’s overall ichthyological expertise. At the same time, exploration of deeper waters helped the Fish Commission as well as fish wholesalers like Stearns and Warren identify new candidates for commercial fisheries. Red snapper, thus, represented the progressive wave of the future in turn-of-the-century Florida.

This chapter argues that Fish Commission recommendations regarding the modes of production, marketing mechanisms, demographics, and social relations of the nation’s dispersed fisheries served as instruments for spreading ideas. These ideas concerned not only the methods and business of fishing, but also what it meant to be a respectable member of regional communities and a citizen of the expanding and consolidating nation as a whole. The promotion of red snapper by the U.S. Fish Commission in concert with private business interests helped reshape the social relations and economic organization of marine space. Through this process, Florida’s marine space came to be understood in political and scientific realms as a domain meant to generate as much revenue as possible. If a primary goal of the U.S. Fish Commission was to determine what made for a proper national fish and a national fisherman, the answer to both was integration into national networks of capitalist enterprise.

**Stearns and Pensacola Find Themselves**

The geographical location and natural deep-water harbor of Pensacola made it as strategically important to the United States as it had been for the Spanish and the British.
Following the Louisiana Purchase, the locale served as an anchor for the early nineteenth century U.S. annexation of West Florida and for the assertion of American economic and military control over Gulf of Mexico river outlets and ports.\(^{136}\) As the former capital of Spanish West Florida, the town had celebrated the political transfer of the region to U.S. territory in 1821. Because of its strategic location, Florida’s Territorial Legislative Council petitioned the U.S. Congress in 1823 for the construction of a naval station in Pensacola. In 1825, President John Quincy Adams ordered the construction of the Navy Yard, followed by the establishment of Fort Pickens in 1834. Federal forces held the fort during the Civil War, and the city remained in Union control throughout the conflict.\(^{137}\)

Because of its position as the western-most outpost of Florida’s Gulf Coast panhandle, Pensacola nevertheless was situated on the periphery of the newly American region throughout the antebellum years. As part of the American efforts to develop Florida’s natural resource base, timber production in West Florida expanded during this period, with Pensacola serving as a major port for shipment of lumber, primarily to Cuba. What attracted U.S. settlers to Florida during the territorial and early statehood period, however, was the expansion of the slave-based plantation economy, and this occurred mainly in Middle Florida, the region between the Apalachicola and Suwannee Rivers.\(^{138}\) Located about one hundred-forty miles west of Apalachicola, and lacking a navigable river to serve as a conduit to convey cotton produced in the interior to its excellent deep-water harbor, Pensacola did not begin to boom commercially and demographically until after the Civil War. The post-war development of railways and the expansion of the


timber industry helped draw the town and its environs into the economic and cultural life of the consolidating nation.\textsuperscript{139}

In the midst of this boom, Silas Stearns established himself in Pensacola and began to construct a home and an identity for himself. Born in 1859 in Bath, Maine—a center for New England shipbuilding and maritime commerce—Stearns was forced to leave school when his father died in 1873. After a couple of unsettled years in search of a means to support himself, the sixteen year-old Stearns joined his sister Fannie and her husband, Andrew Warren, in Pensacola. Having moved to the panhandle town in 1871 from Boston, Warren by 1875 became a partner in the Pensacola Fish Company, which was an outgrowth of the town’s first ice business. Stearns got a job as a bookkeeper in the firm and thence began his obsession with the business and science of Florida fish, with which he was fully absorbed for the rest of his short life.\textsuperscript{140}

When Silas Stearns began his collaboration with USFC researchers in 1878, much of Florida was still considered a wilderness. According to the 1870 census, 187,748 people lived in a state that encompassed over 54,000 square miles of land, and only about 4 percent of them inhabited Escambia County, where Pensacola is located.\textsuperscript{141} While the human inhabitation was sparse, the terrestrial and aquatic faunal populations of Florida were dense. USFC personnel and their collaborators who began investigating the Atlantic and Gulf Coasts during this period generally were struck by what was to them an unusually large variety of species, many of them as yet unidentified by Western scientists. This space of aquatic plentitude, some of it tropical (and therefore “exotic” to northern-based researchers), was represented for the most part as being socially depauperate: along with southern fishing grounds in general, its national commercial potential was deemed as having not yet been adequately realized. Southern inshore

\textsuperscript{140} Andrew F. Warren, “Memorandum Relating to Silas Stearns.” Bortone, Besser, and McNeil, “The Importance of Silas Stearns.”
waters, “if properly fished, would yield abundantly,” USFC researcher R. Edward Earll reported, but as it was the waters generally “furnish scarcely enough to supply the local demand.”

The exception to what were perceived to be stunted fisheries were those centers of seafood production that were served by railways and steamships, had steady access to supplies of ice, and were connected to national markets, such as Charleston, South Carolina; Beaufort, North Carolina; and Key West and Cedar Keys in Florida.

What makes Stearns a notable figure in the history of American ichthyology is that he helped make the then-remote region of the northern Gulf of Mexico and its inhabitants—fish as well as the people who caught, sold, bought, and ate them—accessible to the scientific communities and governmental institutions of the nation.

“There is no other collection of fishes in the museum more carefully kept in order and more thoroughly appreciated than yours,” Tarleton H. Bean, Curator of Fishes at the U.S. National Museum, wrote Stearns in 1882, adding, “we have always thought of you as a prime mover in the effort to illustrate the fauna of Florida in the thoroughly systematic and elaborate manner which its importance demands.”

This was high praise coming from the man who authored the instructions for the proper methods to preserve specimens that would become part of the national collection of U.S. fish species within the USNM. Such collections—which amounted to about fifty thousand fish specimens in 1882—were crucial to fulfilling Spencer Baird’s goal of creating a comprehensive inventory of all of the flora, fauna, and minerals contained within the United States. By housing a “definitive example” of every animal and plant species in the United States, the National Museum that Baird shepherded into existence in the 1870s would become a foundation for developing U.S. scientific expertise, while providing a catalogue of possibilities for the commercial development of the nation’s natural resource base.

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143 Bean to Stearns, 1 April 1882, SIA, RU 213, Box 11, Folder 6.
Stearns’ work in the Gulf of Mexico led to the scientific identification of at least fifty species of fish hitherto unfamiliar to Western researchers, from an aquatic region that had been virtually unexamined by the scientific community, professional or amateur.\textsuperscript{145} Then as now, taxonomists sometimes used patronyms—Latinized versions of a person’s name—as species’ designators to honor and enhance the scientific reputations of the collector or another person. Between 1876 and 1885, the prominent ichthyologists George Brown Goode, Tarleton Bean, David Starr Jordan, and Franz Steindachner used \textit{stearnsii} as a species name for nine specimens they identified courtesy of the young man’s collecting work. Two of these names endure into the present: \textit{Prionotus stearnsii} is the proper scientific nomenclature for what is commonly known in English as the shortwing searobin, and \textit{Roncador stearnsii} is the accepted scientific name for the spotfin croaker. Just as the accumulation of patronyms elevated one’s status as a collector, amassing identifications of “new” species enhanced a taxonomist’s scientific repute, and this was a process that could only be accomplished by securing a reliable supply of unidentified organisms.\textsuperscript{146} In the absence of steady payment, the patronym honorifics that accrued to Stearns may have been intended to encourage him to keep supplying the naturalists with the flow of obscure species upon which they built their careers.

Ichthyological fame did not seem to have been much of a concern for the young man, but thoroughness was. Stearns accomplished his assiduous collecting work through his avid explorations of Florida’s inshore waterways, as well as by making use of his professional relationships with Pensacola’s commercial fishing industry, and in particular with the developing red snapper fleet. “The fish cost me nothing as I am on good terms with all the fishermen,” he wrote to Baird, and, as long as he maintained his employment

\textsuperscript{145} Jordan, “Silas Stearns, Obituary,” \textit{The American Journal of Science}.
(which fluctuated during the first year of his association with the USFC), ice and packaging costs also were covered by the commercial fishing establishments. From the vessels, wholesalers, and individual fishermen, he obtained specimens large and small, including by examining the stomach contents of red snappers in the commercial catch, or the prey that the snappers “spewed up” aboard the vessels. Inhabiting deep waters and not present in commercial markets, these small species were otherwise difficult to come into contact with and thus were “of special interest” to ichthyologists. In 1884, David Starr Jordan, who at the time was a professor of natural history at Indiana University and later was to become President and then Chancellor of Stanford University, noted that the specimens collected by Stearns represented the “sum total” of what knowledge the U.S. scientific community yet possessed of the deeper waters of the Gulf of Mexico, adding that “of the abyssal fauna of the Gulf absolutely nothing is yet known.”

In addition to sending specimens for examination, Stearns helped introduce Washington residents to the taste of then-obscure Florida food fish. In May 1878, for example, he sent a shipment of specimens, which included silver mullet (*Mugil curema*) in addition to two different snapper and grouper species. Stearns also included some fresh pompano as complimentary delicacies, some of which were intended for Florida Senator C.H. Jones and some for Baird, who was known to possess exacting tastes for luxury foods. Avoiding the usual custom of layering the ice with sawdust “for fear it would give them a taste of turpentine,” Stearns included culinary instructions with the shipment: “The way we cook pompano is to broil them on a hot fire and dress with butter and lemon or lime juice.” Along with red snapper, pompano was to become a favored fish among

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147 Stearns to Baird, 1 May 1878, SIA RU 54, Box 5, Folder 9.
149 Stearns to Baird, 11 May 1878 and 15 May 1878, SIA RU 54, Box 5, Folder 9. See E.F. Rivinus and E.M. Youssef, *Spencer Baird of the Smithsonian* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992), 173: “Baird was also something of a gourmet…Many of his letters to Eugene Blackford, the proprietor of the Fulton Fish Market in New York, related to requests for special fish for upcoming dinner parties, and he frequently had friends and assistants in New England send him barrels of fish or fruits. But his special favorites were oysters, peaches, and ice cream.”
upper-class consumers. For Stearns, as for the Fish Commission as an institution, the social properties of fish species as food and as sources of revenue were not entirely distinct from their status as elements of nature begging for identification and ranking. As an acclimatized Florida resident who was able to suggest distinctions between fish based on taste preferences and local usages, Stearns was in a position to shape social as well as biological taxonomies for the species he introduced to the leading researchers and institutions of the period.

The significance of Silas Stearns for this story is that he embodied the fusion of science, commerce, and citizenship that lay at the heart of the U.S. Fish Commission’s endeavors. Literate and professionally involved in the development of Florida’s fishing industries, he had the means to observe and handle fish, travel through the waters and along the coasts of the Gulf of Mexico, and report back to Baird, Goode, and others. Although he had left school at the age of fourteen, he continued to educate himself during his association with the research institutions, frequently requesting ichthyological texts in order to improve his scientific understanding of the creatures he was collecting. “The little that I have done has seemed more a pleasant recreation than work, and the knowledge I have gained has amply repaid me,” he wrote to a Fish Commission colleague in May 1879. Through his passionate interest in fish biology, ecology, and nomenclature, he demonstrated the intellectual drive of an autodidact striving to be worthy of his intellectual and professional mentors.

His meticulous collecting work made Stearns a member of the nineteenth century’s nonprofessional, “scientifically active population,” who lived in widely dispersed, rural regions throughout the nation. In regard to the Midwesterners who corresponded faithfully with Baird, Daniel Goldstein suggests that their “intellectual ambitions, their support for natural science, and their high regard for the Smithsonian Institution” reflected, in part, “dedication to what they regarded as civilized life.” The same is true for Stearns, who generally assessed the social behaviors of the fishing people he surveyed in his adopted state more critically than his Fish Commission associates who

150 Stearns to an unknown correspondent, 28 May 1879, SIA RU 54, Box 5, Folder 9.
resided elsewhere. This is illustrated by his descriptions of the Florida “Crackers” who fished for mullet during the fall spawning season and were sometimes paid with a share of the catch rather than with wages. For this “wretched lot of men,” Stearns wrote, mullet fishing was not a professional activity but rather was integrated into other means of sustenance, such as small-scale farming and hunting. “With but few exceptions, [they]…are lazy, ignorant, and unhealthy, not having proper food, or taking proper care of their persons,” he noted. Like Stearns, Florida Crackers were “white” phenotypically and through ethnic affiliation; in contrast to the Maine native, however, the itinerant lifestyles of these Southerners did not conform to Anglo-American standards for white, middle-class behavior.

While he may not have transported many things from his New England origins when he moved to Pensacola, Stearns nevertheless carried with him ideas and expectations, and his sensibilities matched the ideals for citizenship the Fish Commission promoted. Through his association with the Fish Commission, the Smithsonian, and the USNM, Stearns provided these metropolitan institutions with objects and assessments from the Florida periphery, facilitating the integration of this unfamiliar locale into centralized U.S. scientific and economic networks. In the process, the Yankee émigré learned to use the language and systems of science to conceptually order the space he came to live in. While these systems of classification were applied most directly to

152 As noted by the American Folklife Center of the Library of Congress, within Florida, the ethnic designation “Cracker” can express a non-deprecating valence: “The term ‘Cracker,’ while now more widely known as a derogatory term for rural whites, has a more specific—and less insulting—definition in Florida. The Florida Crackers are whites of Celtic descent who first settled South Florida around the mid-eighteenth century. Crackers usually migrated to the Florida Everglades from Alabama, Georgia, and the Carolinas, drawn to the fertile land for ranching and farming, and to the peninsula’s plentiful resources for fishing.” http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/collections/florida/ffabout.html. Dana Ste. Claire, Cracker: The Cracker Culture in Florida History (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2006). Rob Storter, Crackers in the Glades: Life and Times in the Old Everglades (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2000). As explored in depth in the following chapter, negative associations also adhered to Florida Crackers as they were assessed by groups and individuals with higher social status.

aquatic creatures, they also provided a foundation for placing Florida’s people, social systems, and cultural dynamics within hierarchical taxonomies of national worth.\textsuperscript{154}

Formation of the U.S. Fish Commission

The origins of the United States Fish Commission lie in late nineteenth century efforts to integrate the nation’s dispersed human activities into more systematic and efficient networks of organization. For Spencer F. Baird, specific concerns involved the disordered nature of the country’s commercial fisheries, many of them operating independently, with little to no oversight. In his successful 1871 endeavor to convince Congress to establish a national fisheries research institution, Baird described the need for an agency that would advise the federal government about what actions should be taken to “arrest the alleged impending extermination of our sea fishes, and bring their numbers back to that maximum which will secure an ample supply of wholesome food for the community, and at the same time furnish a means of comfortable support to persons engaged in the business.” Baird maintained that increased demand for seafood stemming from the geographical and demographic expansion of the nation as well as infrastructural improvements put the nation’s fisheries at risk of “a future exhaustion,” an occurrence once thought impossible.\textsuperscript{155}

Perceptions of diminished fish stocks frequently arose out of territorial and gear conflicts within and between neighboring states—harvesting via line versus traps and pound nets, versus gill nets, for example. For initial evidence for the dwindling supplies of marketable fish species, Baird cited his observations of fish populations in New England as well as testimonies presented to the state legislatures of Massachusetts, Rhode

Island, and Connecticut, most of which were inconsistent in assessing the conditions of particular fish populations or in identifying the causes of perceived declines. As Baird explained, the significant employment and revenue generated by these fisheries, combined with the interstate nature of the conflicts, contributed to political intractability: “in all these cases the question turned upon the evidence of men who were interested in one way or another, and whose daily bread might depend largely upon the conclusions arrived at.” Federal involvement, Baird reasoned, would provide neutral arbitration for the resolution of conflicts within the business of fishing. 156

As the founder and first leader of the U.S. Commission of Fish and Fisheries, Baird advanced a research agenda broader than these largely economic goals, spending the rest of his life developing an organization dedicated to conducting comprehensive scientific research into aquatic environmental conditions and the biological characteristics of organisms found in U.S. waters, fresh and salt. This work, which continued throughout the life of the organization, involved for example distinguishing individual species and populations; determining taxonomic categories and establishing proper nomenclature; investigating feeding and spawning habits and habitats; and examining chemical and geographic conditions such as salinity, water temperature, and depth and bottom habitat conditions. To provide the physical and organizational infrastructure for conducting this work, a number of permanent and temporary research stations were established throughout the 1870s: the first was Wood’s Hole on Cape Cod, Massachusetts, followed by stations in Eastport and Portland, Maine; salmon propagation on the McCloud River in northern California; and several sites in Nova Scotia, Massachusetts, and Connecticut. 157

For Baird and his colleagues in the Smithsonian, the U.S. National Museum, and numerous research institutes in the United States and Europe, intellectual and professional interests in aquatic natural history provided a primary motivation for conducting this research. In his reports to Congress, however, Baird presented these scholarly interests as ancillary to the goal of determining whether stocks of food fish were decreasing and, if so, how supplies could be increased. Through the process of securing the Congressional resolution and appropriations for establishing the U.S. Fish Commission, therefore, the Commission’s scientific and pedagogical missions became intertwined with the economic and political goal of improving—and increasing—fishery production nation-wide.¹⁵⁸

The work of the USFC thus provides an exceptional example of early U.S. government financial support for scientific research directed to a large extent toward the expansion of the nation’s industrial base. In much of its general research as well as in its growing commitment to fish propagation, the Fish Commission highlighted the “economic forms” of food fishes: species that were marketed through developing national networks that made use of refrigeration technologies, long-term preservation methods such as steam canning, and the burgeoning transportation system of steamships and railways. In the first two decades of the institution, this meant that much of the Commission’s research focused on New England and Mid-Atlantic fisheries for species such as cod, mackerel, herring, shad, salmon, and oysters, as well as West Coast salmon fisheries. Investigations into the status of these fisheries were conducted by a small number of Fish Commission personnel, but captains of commercial vessels as well as fish wholesalers also furnished essential ecological and economical information. As a Fish Commission report noted in 1877, for example, initial steps toward constructing a “systematic and methodological account of the sea-fisheries of New England” were undertaken with the assistance of several captains of Massachusetts mackerel fishing

vessels as well as Mr. Eugene Blackford, a prominent fish-dealer in New York City’s renown Fulton Market.¹⁵⁹

For the USFC and its proponents, the rationalization and capitalization of the nation’s commercial fishing enterprises would provide one path toward alleviating pressures on potentially depleted stocks. Reasoning that depletion of familiar species could be avoided by expanding the range of food fish available, Baird and his USFC associates worked closely with the commercial fishing industries to promote the use of technically efficient gear, the exploitation of deeper water fishing grounds, the improvement of processing methods and transportation networks, and the consumption of a broader range of seafood species. The Commission’s annual report of 1879, for example, suggested that the use of bottom-trawlers would facilitate the harvest of newly discovered populations of pole flounders (Gyptocephalus cynoglossus) off the coast of New England. Two years later, the Fish Commission was celebrated for revolutionizing the region’s cod fisheries through the introduction of gill nets.¹⁶⁰

Federal sponsorship of biological and oceanographic research on the nation’s marine grounds was conceived of as a means to generate dependable quantities of seafood for national markets, which small-scale, itinerant, localized fisheries could not provide. In 1879, the Fish Commission was engaged in creating relief maps of fishing grounds off of New York and New England in order to reveal seasonally favorable sites for harvesting particular species. By the end of the nineteenth century, ichthyologist Seth Meek of Chicago’s Field Museum noted approvingly in the pages of the Bulletin of the United States Fish Commission that the Agriculture Department was engaged in mapping terrestrial “life zones” in order to better understand the distribution and production of land plants and animals. Arguing in support of establishing a USFC research station in Florida, Meek suggested that the “same kind of work must also be extended to our

waters, from which we receive such a delicious and abundant supply of food.” U.S. Navy engineer Moses L. Wood also argued in the Fish Commission’s Bulletin that accurate, government-funded surveys of deep-water banks of fish in the Gulf of Mexico would attract “the attention of capitalists,” who would then have the incentive to invest in refrigerated rail cars. Such alliances between government and business, Wood suggested, would avoid the glutting of local markets, instead transforming “every city and town of the United States…[into] a ready market for a moderate supply of fresh fish.”162 Throughout the last two decades of the nineteenth century, the USFC embraced these suggestions, assiduously mapping deep-water fishing grounds of the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans and the Gulf of Mexico and assessing the national marketing potential of numerous species of fish.163

In addition to searching out new fishing grounds, the Commission engaged in what amounted to a fish-culture mania. Massive levels of labor and money were channeled toward rearing fish larvae in laboratories with which to re-stock rivers and lakes with native species whose populations had declined in particular habitats; multiple species of salmon in the Pacific Northwest are a primary case in point. Fish culturing also involved widespread attempts to acclimatize species that were known to be fecund and hearty in regions they had not previously inhabited. Spreading non-native species such as Asian carp, European brown trout, shad, and Pacific salmon in aquatic ecosystems throughout the world was a major endeavor of the USFC for many decades. These efforts represented attempts by the Fish Commission to transform wild aquatic systems into “rationally organized dominions” capable of meeting pragmatic and ideological expectations for the types of species and foods they ought to produce.164

163 Allard, “The Origins and Early History.”
Among the first of the federal government’s endeavors directed toward researching and managing the nation’s natural resources, the Fish Commission’s adoption of the language and programs of development and improvement demonstrates an early example of Progressive approaches to conservation. Embracing both the Jeffersonian ideal of working with nature to achieve perfection as well as the “newer priorities of industrial efficiency in the service of social progress,” the Fish Commission promoted a modernist, utilitarian conception of the seascape: that its highest purpose would be realized through the standardized, commercial production and distribution of commodities to be made broadly available to citizens throughout the nation.\(^\text{165}\)

A similar instrumentalist ethic—that the public good is best served by promoting economic growth and the development of integrated markets—guided much of the juridical and legislative policy-making regarding property rights vis-à-vis natural resource use throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century in the United States. As Donald Worster has explicated, by the mid-nineteenth century in the U.S. West, juridical decisions tended to favor individual property rights and settled productive activities such as agriculture, to the diminishment of usufruct rights and itinerant activities such as ranching. These legal decisions, Worster argues, helped to correlate specific “ecological niches” with particular human behaviors and norms for citizenship. An “unsettled style of life” was increasingly associated with anachronistic individuality, which was categorized as “a primitive mentality that must surrender to progress.” The Fish Commission’s efforts to develop settled, industrialized fisheries that were capable of supplying centralized distribution and marketing networks at the expense of small-scale, itinerant operations likewise demonstrated what Worster has referred to as a modernist “commitment to instrumental reason.” These dynamics also exemplify the movement towards centralization, specialization, and systematization that Samuel Hays has analyzed as being core components of the conservation movements of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century.\(^\text{166}\)

\(^{165}\) Taylor, *Making Salmon*, 79.

Political dimensions of fisheries development thus were inseparable from the economic benefits that the Fish Commission proclaimed would accrue from industrializing the country’s fisheries. In the first of the lengthy annual reports issued by the USFC, and frequently thereafter, Baird extolled the virtues of coastal fisheries not only in terms of the food, revenue, and employment they generated but for their broader function as a “stimulus to ship and boat building”—then essential modes of transportation for goods and people, both for trade and military purposes—and as “a school for seamen” for the nation’s commercial and Naval fleet. Within this discourse, the worth of particular seafood production systems was measured in terms of their contributions to the nation as a whole rather than to disparate locales.

Such pragmatic considerations were complemented by the symbolic meanings that industrialized fisheries could contribute to the nation’s prestige. For example, in preparation for Chicago’s 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition—which commemorated the four-hundredth anniversary of Columbus’s colonization of the Americas—the Fish Commission constructed three buildings entirely devoted to representations of commercial fisheries, aquatic science, and fish propagation, including enormous salt and fresh-water aquaria for the display of live fish. A USFC publication pertaining to these exhibits proclaimed that the development of the “New World” that Columbus had “revealed to expectant Europe” was made possible in large part due to fishing, described as “the earliest industry of the western hemisphere” and as the primary agent for “the colonization of some regions, the settlement of which might otherwise have been delayed for many years.” As the “mother of commerce” for Western civilization throughout the ages, fisheries in the Americas provided a source of wealth equivalent to recently discovered gold mines in California and Australia and as such were a controlling factor in the “destinies and development of nations.” Rhetorically uniting commerce, colonialism, and the growth of civilization, this Fish Commission proclamation suggests the extent to which the institution’s endeavors to know and control the nation’s aquatic

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resources were harnessed to the late nineteenth century project of cultivating a belief in the perfectibility of the United States.

This rhetoric was part of the larger social evolutionary discourse communicated by the USFC, the Smithsonian, and the U.S. National Museum. During the last decades of the nineteenth century, in addition to collecting biological specimens, these institutions investigated the historical development of fishing gear, vessels, and seafood products within the United States, collecting representative objects and images along the way. Comprehensive collections of technological objects were seen as necessary for understanding and representing what George Brown Goode, as Assistant Director of the USNM, referred to as stages in the “evolution of civilization.” Arranged according to the “principles of zoological classification” in order to reflect advancements from simplicity toward complexity, fishery-related objects were displayed extensively in the great expositions of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as well as in the U.S. National Museum, accompanied by descriptive labels and reports.169

According to the USFC, the fisheries of the United States contained great potential to feed the nation and the world and to employ broad segments of the nation’s coastal populations, but the larger significance of these attributes lay in the contributions they made to advancing the greatness of the nation as a world power. As Robert Rydell has noted, through their celebratory displays of technology, science, and art, the world’s fairs of this period “integrated ‘thing’ and ‘thought’ into a coherent narrative about the meaning of progress.” The USFC and its sibling institutions were fully engaged in the construction of this narrative, using their synoptic exhibits to reinforce American faith in


**Using Fish to Define the Nation**

U.S. Fish Commission assessments of the biological and social contours of the nation’s fisheries were a component of larger nineteenth century attempts to define the United States, literally and figuratively. As U.S. Fish Commissioner and Assistant-Secretary of the Smithsonian, Spencer Baird made use of the mid-nineteenth century U.S. government-sponsored boundary and railroad surveys as opportunities to conduct natural history research and collect specimens from throughout the United States, thereby expanding the Smithsonian’s research collections. At the close of the century, the USFC, the Smithsonian, and the USNM also encouraged military personnel associated with expeditions in Cuba, Puerto Rico, Haiti, the Philippines and other sites of U.S. imperial engagements to undertake collecting work.\footnote{Jackson and Kimler, “Taxonomy and the Personal Equation.” Allard, Spencer Fullerton Baird. David G. Smith and Inci A. Bowman, “Expeditions,” in the online essay, “Spencer Baird F. Baird and Ichthyology at the Smithsonian, 1850-1900,” Division of Fishes, National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC. http://vertebrates.si.edu/fishes/ichthyology_history/expeditions.html. Nathaniel Philbrick, “The Scientific Legacy of the U.S. Exploring Expedition,” Smithsonian Institution Libraries Digital Collection, Washington, DC. http://www.sil.si.edu/digitalcollections/usexex/learn/Philbrick.htm. For documentation of imperial collecting work see, e.g., Edgar Means’ correspondence with Frederick True (USNM) in SIA RU 189. For details about Baird’s cultivation and training of a network of natural history collectors among governmental and private expeditions throughout the continent, see Henson, “Baird’s Dream.”} As Bruno Latour has suggested, the Western scientific impulse to bring organisms, objects, and observations from disparate and distant locales in to metropolitan centers, where they can be assembled, cataloged...
and observed relative to each other, is a means for generating both knowledge and power. In the last decades of the nineteenth century, the USFC dove into the knowledge-building process of mobilizing “anything that can be made to move and shipped back home for this universal census” by means of widespread exploration and collecting missions.172

The construction of comprehensive inventories of the people, flora and fauna, and physical materials that constituted the nation represented attempts to understand the meaning of the American past and imagine its future. Specifying both the geographical parameters and the biological content of the United States, these surveys were instruments by which the new, expanding nation could represent the “geographic body” of the country as a naturally cohesive “national body” rather than as the product of multiple historical contingencies, rife with conflict. Kenneth Olwig suggests that this process facilitated centralized political notions of what it meant to belong to the land while subsuming customary attachments to local places.173 As argued in the previous chapter, the U.S. military occupation of the territory and the ethnic purging of the mullet-fishing ranchos during the Seminole Wars was one stage in the process of erasing place-specific livelihood systems and cultural identities in Florida.

The oceanographic, biological, and social research sponsored by the U.S. Fish Commission in late-nineteenth century Florida furthered the process of replacing regional cultural and economic systems with nationalized understandings of the relationships between people and place. A primary example is the research conducted by the USFC in 1879, in collaboration with the 1880 U.S. Census. Throughout U.S. coastal regions and the Great Lakes, USFC personnel and associates conducted comprehensive surveys of the nation’s seafood production capacity, identifying species, examining the biological and oceanographic features of fishing grounds, and assessing the social structures of shoreline processing, marketing, and distribution systems. This massive undertaking, for which Silas Stearns served as the primary Florida agent, was supervised by Goode. While

173 Kenneth Olwig, Landscape, Nature, and the Body Politic: From Britain’s Renaissance to America’s New World (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2002), 218-219. See also Pauly, Biologists and the Promise of American Life, 43, “After 1865 the nation’s natural unity was a given. Interest shifted from distribution and geography, and from similarities and differences, to what, in a variety of senses, was ‘inside’ America—to the meaning of what existed, and its future.”
serving as the Assistant Director of the USNM, Goode also worked for the Fish Commission (becoming its head after Baird’s death in 1887). As editor of the results of the Census research, Goode published *The Fisheries and Fishery Industries of the United States* in eight volumes between 1884 and 1887.\(^{174}\)

Within this and other surveys, assessments made by the Fish Commission and its collaborators of the natural systems, flora and fauna, and people that constitute and occupy the waters of the nation were not neutral. Because northeastern fishing grounds led the nation in terms of scale of production, overall value of seafood harvested, shipbuilding and gear innovation, and source of naval and merchant-marine recruitment, USFC researchers tended to look to northern fisheries and markets for normative standards. Goode set the tone for the institution when he emphasized to the audience of an international conference held during the 1883 International Fisheries Exhibition in London that “English blood” ran through the veins of the descendents of Pilgrims who comprised the majority of the fishermen in the central U.S. ports, all located in New England. Along with the fish themselves, these fishing communities—such as Gloucester, Dover, New Bedford, and New London—were identified by English names, Goode pointed out.\(^ {175}\) Fisheries in locales distant from these fishing production centers were evaluated—implicitly and explicitly—in comparison to Anglo-American social features and modes of production.

As noted earlier, the narratives of progress communicated by the Fish Commission in its publications and exhibitions positioned commercial fisheries as foundational to the British colonization of the North America. Like Goode, the institution’s Massachusetts’ agent, A. Howard Clark, described Massachusetts as the place where the industry began and as the present “center of the sea fisheries of the United States.” With Gloucester as “the chief fishing port of the United States,” the state was home to the nation’s “largest fishing fleet” and to a population of “hardy fishermen”

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who had long depended on the sea for their livelihoods, harvesting enormous volumes of 
whales, mackerel, cod, haddock, halibut, menhaden, lobsters, oysters, and clams 
annually. In another section of the publication, Goode and Captain Joseph W. Collins 
described New England fishermen overall as tending to be daring, skillful, intelligent, 
and moral—to the extent that, for the most part, they even refrained from profanity. 
Subscribers to such periodicals as “New York Weekly, Saturday Night, Fireside 
Companion, New York Ledger, Harper’s Weekly, and Frank Leslie’s Illustrated 
Newspaper,” not to mention being avid readers of “Dickens, Shakespeare, Byron, and 
Abbott’s Life of Napoleon,” New England fishermen were upstanding citizens. 
Notwithstanding “an extensive admixture of foreigners” in some of the larger ports, the 
northern fishing population was comprised for the most part of “native-born Americans,” 
nearly all of whom were white, as “negroes” were rare employees “upon the sea-going 
fishing vessels of the North.” 176

Southern fisheries and fishermen could not measure up to these standards in the 
estimations of the Fish Commission. Goode and Collins noted, for example, that while 
more fishermen were found in the states of the Southern Atlantic (from Delaware through 
Florida) than in New England, the northern class of fishermen were “by far the most 
interesting of our fishermen,” in that they had the honor of serving as crews for “the trim 
and beautiful vessels of the sea-going fishing fleet, which should be the chief pride of the 
American marine…as a training school for mariners, and as a medium through which one 
of the most valuable food resources of the continent is made available.” Southern 
fishermen, who generally were “not remarkable for their intelligence,” could claim no 
such pride. 177 Describing the southeastern inshore fisheries as having been “stationary” 
during the antebellum period, R. Edward Earll reported that despite post-Civil War 
growth in fisheries employment, southern fisheries persisted as a “secondary matter.”

176 A. Howard Clark, “The Fisheries of Massachusetts,” in The Fisheries and Fishery 
Printing Office, 1887), Section II, Part III, 115, 144. George Brown Goode and Joseph 
W. Collins, “The Fishermen of the United States, Nationality and General 
Characteristics,” in The Fisheries and Fishery Industries of the United States, ed. George 
9, 7, 6 [hereafter, Goode and Collins, “Nationality and General Characteristics”]. 
Making do with “primitive” gear and “the crudest apparatus” for harvesting, processing, and distributing seafood, the itinerant, coastal fishermen of the South had much to learn from New England’s progressive and enterprising “class of professional fishermen,” according to Earll.\textsuperscript{178}

Drawing on Silas Stearns’ observations, Goode and Collins reported in their summation of the ethnic, social, and cultural characteristics of the nation’s fishing population that Florida’s Gulf Coast fishermen, from Key West to the northern panhandle, represented an eclectic mix. The approximately two thousand people who engaged in the fishing business in 1880 along Florida’s Gulf Coast included Bahamians, both white (known as “Conchs”) and black; blacks born in the West Indies and born in the United States; Cuban Spaniards; Irish, French, German, Norwegian, Swedish, Portuguese, and Greek people; Spanish, Italian, and French creoles; and Americans (whose whiteness is unremarked), including those native to West Florida as well as those from Chesapeake Bay, the Carolinas, and other Southern states, and a few from New England. A USFC report a decade later reported that Florida, along with Louisiana, was notable for having the largest national proportions of “unnaturalized persons” engaged in the fisheries, these “aliens” representing “between one-fourth and one-third [of] the fishing population.”\textsuperscript{179}

Stearns’ assessments of Florida fishing folk and communities reflected the complex, multinational histories of the Gulf states, which contrasted with the Anglo-American bourgeois ideals upon which Fish Commission expectations were based. Full-time, serious fishermen who settled in decent homes with their families were commended for possessing “good standing” and holding “responsible and honorable offices” in local society and government, while “dissipated” young men, unmarried and unsettled, were scorned for the “unprofitable and low life” they led. In contrast to the studies of New England fishermen, broad generalizations could not be drawn about these Florida fishing people, whose social characteristics appeared to vary as much as their skin color,

language, and place of birth. While the “American” fishermen of Cedar Key were represented as being largely “intelligent, industrious, and quick to adopt new methods,” the creoles of Mediterranean descent were, according to Stearns, “generally lazy, ignorant, and inclined to keep up the old styles of fishing, &c.” In Key West, the Bahamians, both black and white, for whom maritime trades were “hereditary occupations” tended to be “the best boatmen and fishermen,” while the same could not be said for “those who have been drifting about the world as sailors, and have been left here by vessels of all the nations.”\(^{180}\) By reifying Anglo-American cultural practices as the normative standard for U.S. citizenship, Stearns and the USFC constructed a system for differentiating both human beings and fish in order to determine which of these creatures could be considered as properly belonging to the nation. Bridging the boundary between North America and the Caribbean, Florida and its ethnically diverse population did not fit well within such notions of propriety.\(^{181}\)

**The Education of Silas Stearns**

While he may have brought middle-class sensibilities with him when he moved to Florida, Silas Stearns had to be taught how to integrate his instincts and observations into an epistemic structure. After having visited the Smithsonian some months previously, the nineteen year-old Stearns responded to a letter from Spencer Baird on April 17, 1878, accepting the offered task of interlocutor and fishery factotum with enthusiasm and humility. “I thank you very much for placing me in a way to serve the interests of the Smithsonian. I am young and therefore not so well informed as many on such subjects, yet I will do my best,” he wrote, pledging to send specimens or colored drawings of the fifty-odd fish species with which he had become familiar in Pensacola-area waters, and quickly launching into descriptions of bluefish and lady fish, minnows and mullet.\(^{182}\) Through the epistolary relationship that ensued, Baird and other USFC associates cultivated Stearns as a mediator between the particular world of Florida’s aquatic fauna and the centralized institutions of fisheries research.


\(^{181}\) See Pauly, *Biologists and the Promise of American Life*.

\(^{182}\) Stearns to Baird, 17 April 1878, SIA RU 54, Box 5, Folder 9.
As they did with other research associates throughout the nation and its imperial reaches, Baird, Goode, and others guided Stearns’ development as a naturalist, writing to the young man regularly, asking him specific questions, and making recommendations for improved observation and collection methods. Stearns responded dutifully and eagerly: “I have answered the ‘list of questions’ for the mullet and will add that with one or two exceptions they are all taken from my own observations”; “I enclose in this letter ‘answers’ in relation to the pompano”; “I shall in future take more notes on the fishes I capture, and see…and will follow your suggestions as closely as possible…I have some notes at hand that are rather mixed, but…I will endeavor to keep them straighter,” he wrote in letters to Baird and Goode in May and June, 1878. In the course of these exchanges he learned that it was worthwhile for him to make note of certain details regarding the specimens (“habits, color, and quantities,” for example), while others, such as “minute descriptions of size, form, etc.” would better be left to Smithsonian researchers to perform. He also was guided to seek out particular species of fish: “Your letter…relating to Brevoortia patronus [Gulf menhaden] was received in due time, and I immediately undertook with your wishes.”

Unlike other researchers who visited Florida with an interest in its fish and fisheries—among them, Captain Joseph W. Collins, George Brown Goode, R. Edward Earll, and David Starr Jordan—Stearns lived in this region that he once referred to as a “sand heap,” and thus served as a useful inside-observer for those at a distance. Stearns’ emphasis in his letters on the subjectivity of his perceptions and actions suggests a sense of the “autoptic imagination,” to borrow a term historian Anthony Pagden employs in his analysis of narratives produced by eighteenth and nineteenth European travelers to the Americas. Through the use of “phrases like ‘I saw,’ ‘I found,’ ‘this happened to me’, ” Pagden points out, a traveler rhetorically can attempt to establish his or her authority as an eyewitness. In a similar manner, Stearns may have emphasized the singularity of his

183 Stearns to Baird, 1 May 1878, Stearns to Baird, 20 May 1878, Stearns to Goode, 6 June 1878, Stearns to Baird, 23 July 1878, SIA RU 54, Box 5, Folder 9.
184 Stearns to Baird, 20 May 1878, SIA RU 54, Box 5, Folder 9: “Last February I spent most of my leisure time in building a stone enclosure just back of the fish house for an aquarium, but after I left there the stones were used for a house foundation. If I could get the stones or bricks I would build another, but, alas, Florida is only a sand heap.”
collections and observations—including recipes—in order to establish himself as a genuine Floridian, one who had relocated himself and remained “there.” Stearns’ hands-on expertise with the business of fisheries distinguished him from those of his northern correspondents and ichthyological-elders who had never been to the peripheral locale and whose interactions with fish were less visceral. By repeatedly mentioning problems of preservation, the relative difficulty in obtaining ice, the sometimes exorbitant fees of the railways, and other pragmatic complications involved with the collecting work—including contending with outbreaks of yellow fever and consequent quarantines—Stearns’ correspondence highlights the geographical and experiential distance between himself and his scientific mentors.

Another form of distance between Stearns and his interlocutors involved class, opportunity, and institutional association. After having lost his position at the Pensacola Ice Company, he wrote what he thought would be his last letter to Baird in late May of 1878, explaining that in the absence of employment or independent “sufficient means,” his shipment of specimens and correspondence would be coming to an end:

I am poor like a great many young men who earn their own livelihood, and have nearly used up my surplus cash: therefore I must get something to do at once as there is no work whatever in this vicinity. I have decided to ship on some sea going vessel…Should there be any parties or individuals who are going on scientific expeditions this summer, I should like very much to accompany them in any capacity that I am competent.185

Baird soon sent him funds to continue the collecting work, which he did through June and July. After a trip home to Maine in the fall of 1878 (where he sought to improve his scientific education by attending Waterville Academy), by December of that year his ichthyological association with the Fish Commission, the Smithsonian, the USNM as well as his associations with the fishing industry had resumed, and he assured Baird that he ought to be able to package and ice the shipments of fish at no cost once again.186

Stearns navigated the class and professional differences between himself and his correspondents by frequently expressing humility about his lack of a formal education

Anthony Pagden, European Encounters with the New World (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 51.

185 Stearns to Baird, 24 May 1878, SIA RU 54, Box 5, Folder 9.
and indicating his eagerness to be inculcated in the language and methodology of scientific taxonomy. Responding to a published statement of Goode’s, which deemed the mangrove snapper to be a new species in U.S. waters, Stearns expressed disagreement: “I must say he is mistaken as far as the Florida coast is concerned…They are found in all the bays and lagoons, in the spots frequented by the sheepshead, spadefish, and other shellfish eating fishes,” he wrote to Baird, demonstrating his knowledge of distinct fish species as well as their local habits and habitats. In due course, Goode corrected the young man, letting him know that he had been referring to the fish that was known in South Carolina as mangrove snapper, which received the scientific name of *Rhomboplites aurorubens* (today this species is commonly known as vermillion snapper).

In the face of geographical and cultural variation in common names, scientific contention over establishing fixed Latin names, and philosophical questions over what it means to know or name a thing, Stearns yielded to the authority of those in possession of greater scientific knowledge. Replying to Goode, Stearns expressed willingness to be set straight: “It was very thoughtless of me to think the Mangrove snapper of Charleston…[to] be the same as the fish called by that name here, when I have had the experience to know that the local names change so often in a short stretch of coast.” In response to this receptiveness, Goode seems to have gotten particularly involved in the young man’s development as a researcher, recommending specific procedures for scientific observation and note-taking (“I keep my notes on sheets of foolscap…or else upon the leaves of a blank book which can be torn apart” and then kept in topic-specific envelopes, Goode informed Stearns) as well as recommending details to which he should be attentive.

The inculcation of Western scientific protocols into Stearns’ collecting practices was such a success that by June 1879, about one year after his first correspondence with Baird, Goode asked the fledgling researcher to survey the Gulf Coast fisheries for the

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187 Stearns to Baird, 14 May 1878, SIA RU 54, Box 5, Folder 9.
189 Stearns to Goode, 6 June 1878, SIA RU 54, Box 5, Folder 9.
Fish Commission’s 1880 Census project. “I will be ready to carry out your plans at any
time,” Stearns responded to Goode’s query, stating that he was prepared to take a leave
from work two weeks hence and spend the entire summer travelling the coast in a small,
chartered vessel. This he did, exploring the fisheries of the Gulf Coast from August
1879 until January 1880, traveling from Galveston to Key West. Eventually the materials
produced by Stearns on this research expedition were published in the two chapters he
authored for the *Fisheries and Fishery Industries of the United States*: “Fisheries of the
Gulf of Mexico” and “The Red Snapper Fishery and the Havana Market Fishery of Key
West, Florida.” Many of his observations also were excerpted in other sections of that
voluminous publication, including R. Edward Earll’s chapter on the mullet fisheries of
the southeast. Observations by Stearns regarding the fisheries of Pensacola and of the
Gulf of Mexico at large also were published frequently in the *Bulletin of the U.S. Fish
Commission*.192

Throughout the 1880s, Stearns served as the Fish Commission’s eyes and ears on
the ground in Florida, growing into his role as intermediary between the obscure state and
the nation’s scientific centers. Prior to the much-delayed publication of the compiled
1880 Census survey work, the Commission commended Stearns for having produced
important statistical results, while increasing “our knowledge of the habits of the food-
fishes and the methods of conducting fisheries,” as well as having added “a number of
new species to the fauna of the United States.” The ichthyologist David Starr Jordan
collaborated extensively with the USNM, was in charge of the survey of the Pacific Coast
fisheries for the 1880 Census project, and developed a friendly collegial relationship with

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191 Stearns to Goode, 13 June 1879, SIA RU 54, Box 5, Folder 9.
192 See Silas Stearns, “Fluctuations in the Fisheries of the Gulf of Mexico and the
Proposed Investigation of Them” *Bulletin of the United States Fish Commission* 3 (1883):
Gulf of Mexico,” *Bulletin of the United States Fish Commission* 4, no. 19 (1884): 289-
Stearns, “Notes on the Fisheries of Pensacola, Fla.,” *Bulletin of the United States Fish
Commission* 6 (1886): 76-78. Silas Stearns, “Some of the Fisheries of Western Florida,”

105
Stearns, having visited him in Pensacola in March 1882. In 1884, while serving as chair of the Department of Natural Science at Indiana University, Jordan published the results of fish identifications he had made based on specimens that Stearns had conveyed to his university, also noting that several of these were “new to the fauna of the United States.”

In the scientific language of the late nineteenth century, submitting plants or animals to the taxonomic process meant adding these species to the flora or fauna of the nation. Before having been initiated into the classification system, these plants and animals of course had existed for millennia within the biological and geographical parameters of what was to be claimed as the “United States.” Until being properly examined and named, however, they did not count as biological members of the nation. As Harriet Ritvo has noted, the biological taxonomic systems of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries reinforced the Enlightenment perception of the “intellectual dominion of science over nature” while strengthening the notion that “institutionalized cosmopolitan learning” was superior to provincial understandings of the natural world. Taxonomic work sometimes had a nationalistic dimension, as the accumulation of identified species within a country helped booster the sense of a native “zoological body politic” distinct from “alien” animals and plants. For taxonomists associated with the Fish Commission, contributions to the nation’s tally of piscatorial fauna helped increase the stature of the United States not only through the identification of new candidates for commercial fishery production, but also by enhancing the overall ichthyological reputation of the country.

Taxonomic classification was a lengthy process, at times contentious. For example, responding to questions Jordan and his collaborator, Charles Gilbert, had raised regarding “the validity of some species of Florida fishes” USNM ichthyologists had identified, Goode and Bean defended the name they had given the fish commonly known

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194 For Jordan’s visit to Pensacola, see Stearns to Goode, 2 April 1882, SIA RU 189, Box 123, Folder 6.
in English as gray snapper, *Lutjanus stearnsii*—one of Silas Stearns’ eponymous fishes. They acquiesced that *Lutjanus cabalerote*, as proffered by Cuban ichthyologist Felipe Poey, could be right, and that perhaps even one of the older names of *L. cynodon* or *L. griseus* might well be the most accurate. Nevertheless, they could not understand “the apparent ease” of acceptance of another genus and species name for this fish (“?? *Anthias caballerote,*” they wrote), which German naturalist Johann Gottlob Schneider had proposed in 1801. “To us,” Goode and Bean stated emphatically, this name “is completely useless for the purposes of identification.”

In addition to concerns over scientific accuracy, disputes such as this over the proper names of particular species also involved questions of ownership and reputation. During this period, the task of identifying distinct species involved distinguishing between species based on morphology and coloration. Following the “rules of priority,” taxonomists then evaluated classifications and names previous scientists had assigned and published. When assessments changed, names were revised; when corroborated, the original names were retained. In this time of scientific professionalization, an accumulation of persistent names enhanced a taxonomist’s reputation and also augmented the status of the institution with which he was associated. Thus, as James Jackson and William Kimler emphasize, “the personal equation” was a key component of the turn-of-the-century “taxonomic arts.”

As his brother-in-law noted, Stearns exhibited “an especial desire to gain command of the nomenclature of science,” a desire he made clear in many of his letters. In his first letter to Baird, after describing the bluefish of the Gulf with which he was familiar, he took pains to add, “By bluefish I mean Pomatomus saltatrix.” While willing and eager to be inculcated in universal classification systems through which

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199 Warren, “Memorandum.”
organisms from disparate aquatic systems could be identified and compared, Stearns also expressed frustration and confusion over the process. “What authority have the scientific men to say that the pompano is called pompynose on this coast?” he inquired of Baird in May 1878, commenting:

I have for a long time been bewildered by the number of common or fishermens [sic] names for most of the common fishes, and I find the scientific names in many instances quite as bewildering…I adhere to the names you give me as they are more recent than those given in the books I posess [sic], but I have noticed several differences in lists of fishes by different men.  

As his association with the Washington institutions developed, Stearns became increasingly frustrated with the length of time it took them to process his collections and determine the proper scientific names, either through personal communication or via official publications. In 1882, for example, he requested that Goode return his manuscript with notes on the Gulf Coast fisheries since it had not yet been published and in the meantime he had been accumulating additions. Two days later, he informed Bean that he had “begun to be indifferent as to further collections for the Museum” upon finding that “they would lie in the store room so long that I would not know where to apply the name when they came to me.” This frustration, he wrote to Bean, was compounded by not having been supplied with adequate ichthyological reference texts and thus having to “depend on others to place the fishes for me.”  

With growing knowledge and confidence, Stearns expressed the desire to wield the imprimatur of science himself, which would allow him to authorize, so to speak, his ordering of the marine space of Florida.

Collecting and naming aquatic fauna was part of how Stearns made himself at home in his adopted state. Unlike the ichthyologists whose knowledge of Florida fishes was derived through examining pickled or dried specimens, Stearns came to know these fish as inhabitants of Florida’s waterways. In his 1882 letter to Bean, Stearns surmised that he had desired to amass a collection of fish species for himself “for the same reason that some people collect postage stamps, coins, etc. etc.” His drive to learn proper

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200 Stearns to Baird, 11 May 1878, SIA RU 54, Box 5, Folder 9.
201 Stearns to Goode, 2 April 1882, SIA RU 189, Box 123, Folder 6. Stearns to Bean, 4 April 1882, SIA RU 213, Box 11, Folder 6.
scientific nomenclature, he wrote, stemmed from wanting to correlate the common names of species he had collected with the correct information about them in scientific publications. One goal of collecting for others, Stearns explained to Bean, thus was to widen his own “knowledge of the Gulf fishes.” This knowledge included ecological observations as well as taxonomy: “The more I go collecting the more I see to be collected and the more insignificant my slight knowledge seems, compared with what there is to learn of their habits & etc.,” he wrote to Baird during the early days of their acquaintance. Whatever its source, the internal fascination with fish and waterways Stearns experienced drove him not only to learn more about aquatic animals and their habits and habitats, but to organize that knowledge.

For Stearns and for many other USFC associates, biological science was never separate from the business of fishing, however. In addition to occasionally mentioning the status of his employment in the industry, Stearns wrote to Baird about his and others’ experiments with gill nets, purse seines, and “the foreign trammel net”; about prices of various food fish and shipments of iced fish from Pensacola to markets in New York, New Orleans, Mobile, St. Louis, Chicago, and Cincinnati; and about ideas for new business ventures, such as developing Pensacola’s oyster business. One suggestion from Stearns was that the government offer a bounty for porpoises, sharks and the “other foul fishes” with which the “Gulf shores are infested.” Such a fishery would have the dual purpose of developing a new source of oil, while decreasing the numbers of undesirable species in order to “save the edible ones.” Throughout his association with the USFC and its sibling institutions, Stearns’ eager adoption of the language and practices of scientific authority intermingled with his occupational interest and involvement in the commercial fishing industry: the maturation of his scientific education and his business independence and acumen unfolded hand-in-hand.

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202 Stearns to Bean, 4 April 1882, SIA RU 213, Box 11, Folder 6.
203 Stearns to Baird, May 20, 1878, SIA RU 54, Box 5, Folder 9.
204 For net details, see Stearns to Baird, 20 May 1878, SIA RU 54, Box 5, Folder 9. For prices and markets, see Stearns to Baird, 17 April 1878, Stearns to Baird, 11 May 1878, and Stearns to Baird, 15 May 1878, SIA RU 54, Box 5, Folder 9. For oyster trade, see Stearns to Bean, 23 July 1884, SIA RU 213, Box 11, Folder 6. For porpoise and shark government bounty, see Stearns to Baird, 13 March 1879, SIA RU 54, Box 5, Folder 9.
Red Snapper a Specialty

Silas Stearns was not the first Northerner with maritime inclinations to become acquainted with the red snapper populations of the northern Gulf of Mexico. In the 1830s and 1840s, New England fishermen began wintering with their vessels along the Florida coast, several of them regularly plying Pensacola’s prolific nearshore fishing grounds. For generations, Stearns reported, these waters had been frequented by Pensacola’s creole and African American fishermen, for whom fishing was “an hereditary profession.” Since Stearns based that observation on his 1879 and 1880 Census research, it appears that this multi-ethnic population of people had been engaged in fishing as an occupation in the antebellum period; whether this group included enslaved people remains an important but unanswered question. Employing seines from rowed yaws, crews of four or five men harvested mullet, pompano, bluefish, redfish, spotted trout, Spanish mackerel, and sheepshead, supplying local and regional markets with about one thousands barrels of salt-fish a year. If red snapper appeared incidentally in some of these catches, it was as an occasional, minor species within the inshore fishery.

About two decades prior to the outbreak of the Civil War, as Florida moved from its status as a little known territory toward statehood, New England fishermen wintering in Pensacola entered into this commercial network, trading with Alabama and Georgia planters the same suite of species produced by the African American and creole seine fishermen. The new group of fishermen harvested between seven hundred to eight hundred barrels a year, Stearns estimated, adding that “as good prices were paid, such a trade must have represented $8,000 or $10,000” a year. These revenues, gleaned from the relatively warm and calm inshore waters of the Gulf, would have been an attractive lure for northern fishermen during the harsh winter months of the northeastern coast.

The Yankee fishermen in these waters may have begun shifting their harvesting efforts to the deeper water red snapper populations partly in response to tensions that resulted from competition with the existing salt-fish trade along Florida’s northern Gulf Coast, within which mullet was a prominent species. A. Howard Clark reported that in the fall of 1842 two schooners from his home port of Gloucester came to the

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205 Silas Stearns, “Fisheries of the Gulf of Mexico,” 566.
Apalachicola area—some 140 miles east of Pensacola—in order to engage in the mullet seine fishery, with the goal of shipping the salted fish to New Orleans and Savannah. Pensacola customs officials confiscated one of the vessel’s registration papers, “claiming that they did not grant the privilege of fishing for mullet.” The vessels left at the end of the season without receiving remuneration for any of the barrels they had shipped. According to the crew member who reported this event, fear of competition was not the motivation for excluding these vessels, as, he stated, the northern area of the Gulf during the antebellum period had not been the site of “much fishing for any purpose except by the Indians,” along with two small boats with two crew members each in Apalachicola.\textsuperscript{207}

With little experience in the region, the Gloucester crewman’s impression of sparse fishing likely was shaped by his northern expectations of the size of vessels, type of gear, and modes of production and distribution associated with a fishery of “purpose.” In fact, as the actions of the Pensacola customs officer hint and Stearns’ reports attest, extensive inshore seining for mullet and other species for the salt-fish trade occurred throughout Florida’s Gulf Coast during the antebellum period. According to Stearns, the area of St. Andrew’s Bay, situated on the panhandle coastline roughly mid-way between Apalachicola and Pensacola, was a “lively, active place” with a high demand for inshore fish and a well-developed system for producing salt-fish, within which men, women, and children participated. Barrels of salted mullet were marketed to planters in the interior agricultural regions of Alabama and Georgia, “who bought the fish to feed their slaves, whose diet was half bacon and half fish.” Between 1850 and 1860, Stearns estimated, about 21,000 barrels of salt fish were marketed, the bulk of which was mullet, yielding about $173,000; this “trade was of no little importance to the fishermen,” Stearns points out.\textsuperscript{208} That the resident families engaged in the St. Andrew’s and other regional inshore fisheries might not have taken kindly to outsiders attempting to acquire a piece of this trade is a good bet.

Whatever caused the shift, the Yankee fishermen wintering in Florida’s northern Gulf fishing grounds soon turned to red snapper as their primary species. In 1886, Joseph W. Collins, a captain in the Gloucester mackerel fishery who became one of the Fish

\textsuperscript{208} Stearns, “Fisheries of the Gulf of Mexico,” 564-565.
Commission’s leading authorities on the development of fishing technologies, relayed in the *USFC Bulletin* an anecdote he reported having heard many times from Captain James Keeny, the Connecticut fisherman who claimed to have accidentally discovered the deep-water red snapper populations. Sometime in the 1830s, en route to New Orleans with a supply of pompano, sheepshead, redfish, and other inshore species, Keeny’s vessel, the *Mississippi*, was becalmed some miles offshore. After the cook dumped food scraps in the water, “many strange looking red fish were seen in the water alongside, eagerly feeding on the material the cook had thrown overboard,” Keeny reported in Collins’ telling of the tale. Quickly baiting and casting lines overboard, the crew hauled in about two hundred of the fish; when they got to New Orleans, they found that the red snappers “sold like hot cakes.”

A red snapper fishery in the grounds offshore from Pensacola began expanding from that point, prosecuted by Yankee vessels in the wintertime.

Captain Leonard Destin, a fisherman from New London, was another northeasterner who responded to the rumors of the abundance of fish in Florida waters that had reached Connecticut in the early nineteenth century. In 1835, Destin settled along the panhandle for the purpose of investigating the region’s fishing grounds. Accused of being a Yankee spy, he was imprisoned during the Civil War, but upon his release after the war he resumed fishing, and began building up a red snapper fleet. Before he arrived, the panhandle area where he lived until his death in 1884 had been called East Pass; by the time a post office was established there in 1904, the town was named in his honor. As this name change illustrates, through the process of shifting the locale’s fisheries from small-scale, regional food production toward more lucrative, deeper water fisheries, the “cultural logic” of the ascendant class of Yankee entrepreneurs was mapped onto the social and physical space of Florida’s coastal zones.

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The ready sale that Keeny, Destin, and others found in New Orleans and Mobile points toward the existing familiarity and desirability of red snapper in the markets of the region. In 1884, the journalist Lafcadio Hearn assembled the first collection of traditional Creole recipes to be published, *La Cuisine Creole*, which was based—as the book’s subtitle states—on his conversations with the “leading chefs and noted Creole housewives, who have made New Orleans famous for its cuisine,” many of whom were his friends and acquaintances. Hearn included recipes for both “plain boiled redfish or snapper” as well as the *chef d’oeuvre* (masterpiece) “Red Snapper à la Chambord,” not to mention instructions for fried mullet, croaker, and flounder. Subsequent cookbooks that delved into New Orleans’ famed Creole cuisine present numerous recipes featuring red snapper, ranging from the complicated Chambord preparation and the distinctive dishes of Courtbouillon and Bouillabaisse to simpler boiled and baked recipes. The *Picayune Creole Cook Book*, first published in 1900, referred to red snapper and redfish as the “kings of the New Orleans French market” and as “matchless fish of the Gulf of Mexico.” While these books did not appear until the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, they aimed to present the long-term culinary traditions that had developed over generations within the Gulf Coast’s Creole culture—a cosmopolitan blend of “American, French, Spanish, Italian, West Indian, and Mexican,” as Hearn put it—which embraced Mobile as well as New Orleans.  

When the Yankee captains first began to harvest red snapper offshore from Pensacola, most of the trade was oriented geographically and culturally toward this Creole rim of the northern coast of the Gulf of Mexico. Small sloops based in New

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Orleans, Mobile, and to a limited extent in Pensacola had been engaged in the antebellum snapper trade, but in a “desultory and primitive manner,” Collins wrote. The early fishery operated along the inshore edge of the deeper grounds, in waters from about ten to twenty-two fathoms deep.\footnote{J.W. Collins, “Report on the Discovery and Investigation of Fishing Grounds, made by the Fish Commission steamer Albatross during a cruise along the Atlantic Coast and in the Gulf of Mexico; with notes on the Gulf Fisheries” \textit{Report of the Commissioner for 1885, United States Commission of Fish and Fisheries} (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1887), “desultory and primitive,” 296, water depths, 567.} Beginning in the 1840s, a handful of New Englanders, many of them from Noank, Connecticut, “were enticed to make winter voyages” to these snapper grounds and, according to Stearns’ brother-in-law, Andrew Warren, their larger and better equipped vessels meant that for some years prior to the Civil War they “held a monopoly of the trade in Mobile and New Orleans,” which would have undermined the position of “the natives” who had been engaged in the small-scale snapper fishery.\footnote{Andrew F. Warren, “The Red Snapper Fisheries: Their Past, Present, and Future,” \textit{Bulletin of the USFC} 17 (1897): 331.} After an interruption in the trade due to the war, the fishery resumed and picked up steam in the post-war years, with increasing involvement and investment by Northern fishermen and entrepreneurs.

In the early years of the fishery, Pensacola’s harbor pilots, who hailed from New England, fished with hook and line in the shallower waters of the snapper banks while waiting to guide larger vessels safely through the shoals and into the harbor.\footnote{Bortone, Besser, and McNeil, “The Importance of Silas Stearns,” 460, citing D. Eiland, “What Happened to Commercial Fishing Here?” \textit{Pensacola News-Journal} (18 April 1965), 331.} In the 1880s, by which time the snapper fishery had been greatly expanded by New England fishermen and their larger smacks and schooners, the harbor pilots’ sixteen to twenty-one foot long sail boats were still in use, but had “fallen into the hands of the fishermen,” as Collins put it. Constructed of southern mulberry, oak, cedar, and yellow pine by the Pensacola boat-builder Robert Langford, rigged with three sprit sails, these boats were durable, fast, and handled well in rough seas. According to Collins’ experienced and discerning eye, they were “a good investment in the end,” though expensive to purchase upfront.
Large schooners having taken the place of these smaller boats, the harbor pilots and stevedores who owned the “pilot rigs” began to “let them out in summer to reliable negroes for fishing,” being paid one share of the catch for the rental. The African American red snapper fishermen operated out of the Warrington section of Pensacola, just north of the Navy Yard, making day trips throughout the year except during the winter. Kept fresh in live wells without the use of ice, the fish were sold at the Navy Yard or to Pensacola wholesalers; the amount of snapper harvested by these and other small sail boats was “considerable,” Collins reported. In all probability these black snapper fishermen were a segment of Pensacola’s “creole and negro” inshore fishermen for whom the trade was an inherited profession, as Stearns had observed. Collins noted that small sail boats of this size also were used in Pensacola’s inshore seine fishery and in the winter oyster fishery; it is likely, therefore, that the same group of local people, racially and ethnically diverse, shifted seasonally between various aspects of Pensacola’s inshore and nearshore fisheries, the seafood they produced being marketed locally and in the Gulf region, some of it fresh and some salted.\(^\text{215}\)

Although the Yankee fishermen soon began to dominate the red snapper trade, a Creole flavor to the business persisted for some time. As New Orleans and Mobile continued to be the predominant markets for red snapper harvested in the northern Gulf, Creole expectations for how the fish should be handled, processed, and sold remained in place. Stearns and Warren described snapper being sold by the “bunch” (rather than by weight) in the antebellum years, and Collins noted in 1885 that many of the Louisiana vessels carried “quantities of palmetto leaves, which are used for binding or tying ‘bunches’ of red snappers,” for shipment of the fish by rail from Pensacola to the New Orleans market. The custom of marketing whole fish—head, tail, and guts intact—strung in bunches with strips of palmetto, weighing about twenty-five pounds, and kept alive or head-up on ice until sale not only was de rigueur in the markets of New Orleans and Mobile but in Key West as well, where locally harvested red snapper, among numerous other species, was sold. Red and other snappers, along with many species of grouper and grunts, also were harvested extensively by large smacks in the fishing grounds of the

Keys, kept alive in the wells of the vessels, and shipped to Havana for sale in Cuba’s urban markets.216

In many respects, the job of the Yankee fishermen in developing the fishing grounds of Pensacola was to reorient these markets northward. This they accomplished through their professional connections to northeastern fish dealers and through their sometimes tense but nevertheless close relationship with the burgeoning railways and ice industry in the postwar years. In 1869, the first ice-packed shipment of red snapper from Pensacola was made by Captain Sewell C. Cobb, who had moved to the town from Massachusetts and whose sailing ships were involved in the marketing of sawdust-packed northern lake ice throughout the Gulf of Mexico, the Caribbean, and South America. Two years later, Cobb’s Ice Company had transformed into the Pensacola Fish Company, the business having expanded from ice distribution to seafood marketing in part due to competition from the increasing number of ice factories in Alabama as well as the Florida panhandle. Andrew Warren, Stearns’ brother-in-law, became a partner in this company and it was there that Stearns began his career in the fishery business.217

In order to prosecute the western Florida snapper fishery in an “economical and businesslike manner,” as Stearns put it, in the 1870s the Pensacola Fish Company and other red snapper dealers began to charter schooners from Connecticut and elsewhere in New England, eventually purchasing their own vessels. With five schooners of its own and one leased vessel, the fish wholesale business Warren and Stearns started in 1880, Warren and Company, was in 1885 “the largest fishing fleet controlled by any one company” in Pensacola, according to Collins. Businesslike the snapper trade was. During the winter of 1884—1885, Collins reported, twenty-one schooners and sloops in association with four fish dealers regularly landed their red snapper hauls in Pensacola.

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These vessels ranged in size from a small fifteen-ton New Orleans-built sloop smack to as large as a seventy-four-ton Maine-built schooner. Including ships that off-loaded their harvests in Pensacola while having home ports elsewhere in the Gulf, the U.S. Treasury Department’s 1886 Report on the Internal Commerce of the United States suggested that somewhere between thirty-three to fifty fishing smacks landed deep-water species in Pensacola—grouper, Spanish mackerel, and pompano in addition to red snapper. Citing the Jacksonville Herald and Pensacola Commercial newspapers, the Internal Commerce report estimated that over three million pounds of fish had been shipped out of Pensacola in 1885, for a value of about $500,000, adding that this business was growing by 50 percent a year.218

Technological developments were a critical component of red snapper’s rising economic significance and its “introduc[tion] throughout the country.”219 Unlike the smaller sail boats—not included in this tally—these vessels all carried ice, though some also kept a portion of the catch alive in wells aboard the vessel for as long as possible, in order to minimize expenses. At sea, the fish were placed in the hold in tiers, each layer covered with ice; when a full cargo was loaded, the vessel would head for port as quickly as possible. Once weighed and cleaned at the dealers, the fish again were layered with ice in boxes and barrels and loaded into refrigerated rail cars or steamers, to arrive at their distant markets “as fresh and sweet as when they swam over the beds of coral in their native waters.”220 Snapper was reported to keep fresh on ice for long periods. After having traversed the Gulf of Mexico in 1882, U.S. Navy Ensign Moses L. Wood

219 See Stearns, “The Red Snapper Fishery,” 588: “On account of poor facilities for transportation of such goods, the high prices at which fish must be sold, and their strangeness to inland people, there was but small demand for several years, and the prospect was not encouraging to the men who had interested themselves in the enterprise. At last, however, the red snapper became introduced throughout the country, and most other conditions were favorable for its sale in large quantities.”
220 Details about refrigerated cars and the fish being kept “fresh and sweet” are in Drew, “Florida,” 414. For more details on icing snapper at sea and at the dealers, see Collins, “Albatross Report, 1885” and Warren, “The Red Snapper Fisheries.”
commented that when fresh, he preferred “red snapper to almost any other fish, excepting the pompano,” except that the species “does not take salt very readily.” As a fresh fish with a delicate flavor and a presence in Creole culinary traditions, known as exhibiting “good game qualities” and “brilliant hues” relative to the “neutral colors of the common northern market fishes,” red snapper was an excellent candidate for a high quality southern food fish suitable for introduction to northern middle and upper class consumers and commodity circuits.\textsuperscript{221}

As David Starr Jordan and Barton Evermann noted, because the species had been little known in the United States outside of the Gulf Coast prior to the 1870s, Eugene Blackford’s efforts to introduce the species into New York markets were instrumental in expanding the red snapper trade. A prominent fish dealer in New York’s powerful Fulton Fish Market as well as one of New York’s Fish Commissioners, Blackford supplied the U.S. National Museum with a great number of fish specimens. His service to “American ichthyology” was the reason Goode gave for according red snapper the species name \textit{blackfordii}, but Blackford’s involvement in developing the Northern familiarity with and taste for the species must also have been a factor for this appellation.\textsuperscript{222} By the 1880s, Pensacola had become the center of the fishery that supplied fresh, iced red snapper via railway and steamship to markets in Washington DC, New York, and Boston, an expanded trade with Mobile, New Orleans, and Galveston, and thence to Chicago, Saint Louis, Minneapolis, and Denver.\textsuperscript{223}

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\textsuperscript{222} Blackford’s involvement in trade: Jordan and Evermann, \textit{American Food and Game Fishes}, 411. Note that Jordan and Evermann did not agree with the species name \textit{blackfordii} for red snapper, preferring \textit{L. aya}, which German ichthyologist Marcus Bloch had proposed in 1790. Both of these names are no longer acceptable, Felipe Poey’s 1860 designation of \textit{L. campechanus} having been deemed correct. The species name \textit{blackfordii} as “compliment to” Blackford’s ichthyological service is in Goode, \textit{American Fishes}, 74. \\
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The marketing of red snapper in these urban areas was part of the late nineteenth century’s movement toward market centralization and the associated creation of national brands, national consumers, and a “standardized ‘American look’ as a criterion for social acceptance.”²²⁴ People throughout the country as a whole, the New York Times commented in 1879, were “commencing to appreciate the advantages of a mixed diet” and New Yorkers in particular were “getting to be greater fish eaters.” About twelve thousand pounds of red snapper were sold in New York markets in 1879; those prepared for shipment to Blackford were carefully de-gilled and gutted, with the heads left intact. Collins observed that while the Pensacola Fish (née Ice) Company roughly “ripped down the belly with a knife” to gut the fish, hacked the heads off with a hatchet, and packed the fish on ice without washing them, Warren and Company employees took more care gutting the fish and washed them before packing, so that they “look[ed] much more attractive.” No doubt the careful preparation of fish for Blackford’s New York markets helped promote red snapper as a desirable food, while its price distinguished it as a fish for wealthier consumers. In November 1879, for example, “very fine red snapper” could be had in New York markets for fifteen cents, a few pennies less than the eighteen cents asked for white fish and black bass, but much dearer than the six and eight cents asked for cod and haddock.²²⁵

That red snapper was being incorporated into the diets of refined northern consumers during this Gilded Age period is suggested by its presence in a cookbook published for the northeastern upper-class domestic kitchen. In 1889, Alessandro Filippini, long-term chef and manager at the elite set of Delmonico restaurants in New York City, published a cook book to instruct the gourmand in “culinary art” for the home, with European gastronomy and manners as a guide: not just how to cook, but how to select foods at the market, how to set a table and serve food properly, how to compose a menu, which wines to pour with each course, and how to prepare and when to serve

²²⁴ Lears, Rebirth of a Nation, 122.
²²⁵ “Advantages of a mixed diet” and “very fine red snapper” are in “Features of the Market: Poultry Very Plentiful—Prices Asked for Provisions—The Supply of Fish,” New York Times, Sunday, November 30, 1879, 9. For pounds of snapper sold in New York in 1879, see Goode, American Fishes, 76. Collins, “Albatross Report, 1885,” 293: preparation of snapper for markets. The references are unclear but it appears that these are prices per pound, not for individual fish.
coffee. Listing which fish species were available in the New York markets each month, Filippini informed his readers that red-snapper from Pensacola could be had from September through March, along with a variety of other Florida fish: pompano, redfish, sheepshead, grouper, Spanish mackerel, and shad from St. John’s River.  

For Filippini and other elite restaurateurs, the use of foreign and symbolic names for particular dishes helped establish a sense of exclusivity that distinguished elite dining—and diners—from common consumption. Basing his menus on French cuisine, the chef suggested substituting snapper for trout, sole, fresh mackerel, and bass, and serving it with caper sauce or fine herbs, à l’Hollandaise, à la Bordelaise, or à la maître d’hôtel. Both Filippini and Goode promoted the Creole lineage of Gulf of Mexico red snapper in its new life as a northern commodity and food, the former including an à la Creole preparation for the fish in his book, and the latter recommending that it be “boiled or cooked in a chowder,” in the manner of the “very delicious” New Orleans’ Court Bouillon. Emphasis on the French valence of New Orleans’ créolité, rather than its African dimensions, helped elevate red snapper from provincial status to the domain of high-culture.

Neither mullet nor its roe appeared in any of Filippini’s menu suggestions, though he did note the availability of the species in December, characterizing it as a decent, everyday food: a “Southern fish, sweet and oily, and a good pan fish.” Mullet turns up once more, in the “Curious Menus of Various Nations” section: Filippini observes that raw mullet appears in the menu of the Kanaka in the Hawaiian islands, along with raw gold-fish, shell-fish, and broiled taro. Everyday or bizarrely exotic, mullet circulated in a world outside of the European aspirations of the aspiring class of northeastern consumers.

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229 Filippini, *The Table*, mullet as Southern pan fish, 14, Kanaka menu, 417.
**Red Snapper and Florida’s Dreams of Progress**

The discovery of red snapper in the deeper water of the Gulf of Mexico promoted capitalist expansion within this marine space. The “newness” to Western science and northern consumers of this fish and the marine grounds it inhabited allowed it to serve as an empty medium onto which dreams of social, economic, and intellectual progress could be projected. Such a species generated excitement among fishery entrepreneurs and researchers alike for its capacity to provide the raw material for the development of settled harvesting, processing, and marketing enterprises, which generated jobs, revenue, and social stature. This was part of Silas Stearns’ interest in the species: in the post-Civil War climate of mobility and national unification and the consequent movement to the South of people from the North, Stearns saw in the waters of Florida opportunities to make something of himself.

The growth of the company Stearns and his brother-in-law started in 1880 illustrates their increasing immersion in the instruments and language of capitalism and nation-building. Initially the company’s letterhead read “Warren and Co., Fresh Fish and Lake Ice.” By August 1882, the stationary read: “Warren and Co., Catchers and Shippers of Fresh Fish, The Red Snapper a Specialty.” Two years later, the letterhead had been changed to: “Warren and Co., Producers and Shippers of Fresh Fish, The Red Snapper a Specialty.” These changes in appellation and the increased prominence of red snapper reflect the growing linkage of this and other Pensacola fishing businesses with railroads, ice production, national markets, and fisheries as modes of production of revenue as well as food. By highlighting the distinctiveness of red snapper, Warren and Company and other Pensacola fish dealers signaled that a transformation in the social relations, economic organization, and cultural significations of the people, aquatic species, and technologies that comprised Florida’s fisheries was underway.²³⁰

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Putting red snapper on the menu helped put Pensacola on the national map. In large part because of the attention Stearns drew to Pensacola’s red snapper grounds and its marketability, the U.S. Fish Commission actively supported the development of the snapper fishery and, thereby, the transformations of the region’s cultural and social shape. While Stearns consistently expressed deep interest in fish biology, ecology, taxonomy, and nomenclature in his correspondence with Baird and others, his pragmatic, business-related concerns carried at least equal weight as his more “disinterested” ichthyological research questions. In his first account published by the Bulletin of the USFC, for example, Stearns’ primary concern was with fluctuating abundance of fish, and in particular with the scarcity of food fishes: he wrote that he was eager for the USFC research vessel, the Albatross, to survey the Gulf of Mexico, as “it seems time that we were better acquainted with our food-fishes, which appear to be more easily used up or driven away than they are in more northern latitudes.” At this stage, Stearns and Warren had been in business for themselves for three years: his interest in mapping the fishing grounds of the Gulf in order to better understand fish population cycles thus was keen and personal.231

In fulfillment of Stearns’ request, the Albatross surveyed the Gulf of Mexico in 1885, captained by Lieutenant-Commander Z. L. Tanner, with Captain Joseph Collins responsible for investigating fishing methods. The mission of this research cruise, Baird instructed, was to investigate particular locations likely to be good candidates for producing desirable food-fishes; to record on nautical charts both the “known banks” and “the new ones that may be discovered”; and to record information regarding fish “habits and characteristics.” Baird also advised the crew while in Pensacola to “call upon Mr. Silas Stearns, of the fishing firm of Warren & Co.,” in order to obtain his suggestions for “the best points for exploration” and to allow him to “accompany the vessel.”232 Thus, the overall goals of this government voyage were to verify and enhance the knowledge of

231 Silas Stearns, “Fluctuations in the Fisheries.”
these fishing grounds that Stearns and other members of the commercial fishing community had produced through their harvesting ventures.

Steaming primarily through the eastern waters of the Gulf of Mexico from January through March 1885, the crew of the Albatross worked to make this aquatic space more knowable and predictable for commercial enterprises engaged in the production of fish for national markets. During this 1885 Albatross cruise as well as a follow-up voyage in 1889 by the USFC vessel the Grampus, government investigators identified prospective snapper grounds in the region of Tampa Bay, Key West, and the Mexico’s Campeche Banks. By the turn of the century, aided by the spread of railroads and the increased availability and affordability of manufactured ice, snapper had become big business. In 1895, commercial vessels in Florida—concentrated overwhelmingly in Pensacola—produced almost five million pounds of red snapper, for a value of about $155,000. During the same year, coastal boats working throughout the state, but primarily along the west coast, harvested over twenty million pounds of mullet, salted and fresh, for a value of about $285,000.

Though the price per pound for both species comes across as astoundingly low—about one cent per pound for mullet and three cents for red snapper—the aggregate figures put this into perspective: roughly one-quarter the amount of snapper relative to mullet garnered well over one-half the dollar value. That red snapper was catapulted from obscurity to being “one of the most highly prized of the Florida fishes” in a matter of two decades, ranking in total value just below mullet, which had been harvested, traded, and eaten in the same region for centuries, was largely due to the efforts of one man. Stearns’ intellectual curiosity drew him towards the Smithsonian and the U.S. Fish Commission, but it was his business interests that allowed him to become a voice for nationalizing red snapper as a commodity and as a food. Mullet, as a local and regional

food of poor people and a product of those on the margins of the capitalist order, lacked such a spokesperson.
CHAPTER 3
MULLET ON THE TABLE;
REJUVENATION, RECREATION, AND REAL ESTATE IN THE BANK

Introduction

In December 1876, one year after Silas Stearns arrived in Pensacola, the New York Times published an account from an anonymous occasional correspondent regarding a recent pleasure trip to Florida’s east coast. Bear hunts, the cold water stunning of sea turtles and fish, and the difficulties of perambulating through coastal mud occupy the opening of the article. But it was fishing for recreation in this Southern state that most captivated the correspondent: “The waters around here fairly teem with fish, and their variety is as endless as their numbers are great.” The U.S. Fish Commission, thus, was not the only institution with an interest in Florida’s fishing grounds in the decades following the Civil War. As the financial and scientific yields of the state’s waters began to contribute to the U.S. economy and to the country’s bank of knowledge, the potential for outdoor adventure in the peninsula also piqued the national imagination.

Mirroring the excitement researchers expressed regarding the addition of aquatic species to the nation’s taxonomic collection, anglers such as the New York Times writer conveyed wonder at the sporting opportunities offered by the state’s waters and their exotic inhabitants. Grouper and salt-water trout, he wrote, were beautiful and “very gamey.” Snapper were among the “hardest fighters”; jew-fish were hearty “rascals”; and channel bass were “monsters” that fought hard but fair. These new species gave Florida visitors the opportunity to test their mettle: individual anglers, each armed with a rod, line, and hook, struggled against their finny foes in order to establish mastery over themselves, their peers, and wilderness itself.

The common name grouper applies to a number of species belonging to the Serranidae Family of fishes; salt water trout (Cynoscion nebulosus) is commonly known as spotted seatrout or spotted weakfish; snapper refers to species in the Lutjanidae Family; jew-fish (Epinephelus itajara), is now more commonly referred to as goliath grouper; and channel bass (Sciaenops ocellatus) is also known as red drum or redfish.

Further down the page, the *New York Times* correspondent commented that he “should have spoken first” of mullet, another fish new to him but which, he noted, was a central part of the “domestic economy of the Floridian coast.” Long a food of Southerners, black and white alike, mullet was not only the most important species of food fish in the state, but a major part of the daily menu in general: “Above hog and hominy, he is the staple article of diet of the ‘crackers,’ ” the author observed. In some Florida locales, mullet roe was eaten daily and “for certain families” in the mostly rural state, the fish was “on the table…three times a day the year round.” Typically caught with nets rather than a baited hook, mullet has never been considered a “game” fish worthy of an angler’s attention. Writing in mid-December during the peak of roe season, when the fish move en masse to spawn in deeper offshore waters, the correspondent witnessed eager local residents catching thousands of mullet in a single night using cast-nets. The rest of the night was spent cleaning and salting down the fish. Salted and sun-dried, the roe was “highly esteemed” and the pickled milt from the male fish was as delicious as pickled oysters. This northern observer described mullet as “fine eating,” comparable to the similarly oily bluefish when broiled and “as good as fat mackerel” when salted. Mostly, though, he and his sport-fishing companions used mullet as bait.236

The *New York Times*’ account of outdoor, coastal adventure in the peninsular state provides an early example of the growing interest in Florida as an exotic destination for white visitors and immigrants from northern locales during the late nineteenth century. Forty-two years of U.S. territorial status and statehood, followed by secession and war, left the state lacking in infrastructure and still largely unredeemed from wilderness, to use the language of the time. In 1868, when Florida was reintegrated into the nation after the Civil War, the peninsula was sparsely inhabited, with a population density far lower than its neighboring southeastern states. Representing both problem and promise, the apparent emptiness and semi-tropical climate of Florida made it an invitingly blank slate for development.237

236 L.S.K., “Fishing in Florida.”
As the nineteenth century turned toward the twentieth, governmental entities, business enterprises, and individual promoters advertised Florida as a domestic Mediterranean idyll, ripe for the cultivation of oranges and a variety of other tropical crops and natural resources. Following in the philosophical footsteps of eighteenth century theories that linked agricultural innovation and economic success to the advancement of civilization, Florida boosters envisioned revitalizing the productive potential of the state and, at the same time, transforming the body politic into a willing force for social progress. The power of orange groves and other agricultural endeavors to mold the state into a prosperous, civilized society depended on infusions of capital and the immigration of warm bodies as investors and as workers—in particular, those who could take the place of Florida’s increasingly independent and intractable freedmen and women. At the same time, the state’s Anglo-American economic and political leaders employed discursive means and implemented public policies designed to keep resident people of color, foreign immigrants, and non-land holding whites in check.

In addition to advocating for the expansion of agricultural and other natural resource production, Florida boosters reshaped the state rhetorically and physically as a

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Southern retreat for northern visitors, touting the advantages of three Rs: rejuvenation, recreation, and real estate. A semi-tropical terrain situated within the U.S. continent, turn-of-the-century Florida increasingly became connected to northern states via steamship and railways. As such, the state was poised to offer a respectable respite from what the poet Sidney Lanier called the “universal killing ague of modern life—the fever of trade,” particularly once peopled by upstanding Anglo-American citizens. Modernist promises of transformation underlay the promotion of agricultural production and the three Rs: transformation of Florida’s economy, its social and physical structure, and the individual self.

Because of the state’s extensive coastline and freshwater systems, celebrations of fish and fishing formed a significant component of the peninsula’s late nineteenth century burgeoning tourist infrastructure, helping the state become a primary destination for enervated Northerners. By providing species worthy of scientific examination, national marketing, and recreational enjoyment, Florida’s waterways enjoyed growing appeal during the post-Civil War surge in tourism in the U.S. South. Worthy of promotion were those elements of aquatic nature that would generate both profit and social stature for Florida and thereby help the nation advance. As the previous chapter has shown, red snapper became a piscine agent of progress, as did tarpon and other “gamey” species. Mullet, however, did not.

Uneasiness with the fluid cultural geographies and quasi-capitalist social relations within which mullet was immersed meant that the fish and the cultural worlds associated with it were framed by promoters of Florida development as agents of stasis and, therefore, encumbrances to the state’s revitalization. During this period, the species kept food on the table for many a Floridian, provided an income for some, and seemed to be a

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good candidate for the foundation of a major fishery that would generate jobs and revenue while connecting the state to national markets. Despite this incipient promise, mullet retained a humble quality, never reaching its economic or social potential.

Numerous biological and cultural characteristics of the species mitigated against its usefulness in constructing a respectable, Anglo American identity for Florida. The species was harvested in quantity with nets versus the angler’s hook and line; often salted rather than iced; distributed via ox carts to regional rural locales instead of by rail to northeastern and midwestern markets; and generally eaten not by white, urban epicures but by ordinary people of many shades of skin. In an era of corporate conglomeration, Florida mullet continued to sustain the itinerant work of men, women, and children whose labor and movements responded to seasonal cycles, rather than to the logic of the national marketplace. At the same time, because of its long association with ethnically mixed commodity circuits oriented toward Cuba, the species performed poorly as a link to an imagined past of simple, American, rural virtues, which was a central feature of the late nineteenth century outdoor recreation movement and the tourist economy it fed. Though it continued to be a central food for long-term residents of the state, mullet primarily functioned for new arrivals as food for other fish: a bait to catch feisty and thus more desirable species.

Examining the representation of the state as a productive paradise within turn of the century discourses of Florida promotion, in this chapter I trace the history of the ambiguous social position of mullet and the cultural world it fostered. To do so, I begin by exploring the long history of Florida’s immigration policies, which simultaneously promoted Anglo-American settlement, the expansion of agricultural production, and the development within the state of Northern-derived norms for middle-class respectability. Next, the chapter considers how these policies functioned as gatekeeping regimes designed to define and defend racial and class hierarchies within the state. I then turn to an analysis of the place of Florida Crackers—and of mullet as an element of their cultural history.

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world—within such hierarchies. The chapter next examines verbal and visual discursive mechanisms through which the dream of domesticating this wild state were projected, contrasting this with the persistence of lifestyles and identities that were enmeshed in Florida’s putatively vacant spaces. Finally, I explore the process of fashioning Florida’s seascapes into sites of outdoor recreation and adventure, the manner in which sport-fishing functioned as a mechanism for establishing and maintaining class distinction, and the inability of mullet to perform the same functions.

**Filling the Vacant Spaces**

As the history of the development of Florida’s red snapper industry illustrates, a primary task of the U.S. Fish Commission in the late nineteenth century was to bring the fisheries of the nation up to speed so that they could contribute to the pecuniary and cultural worth of the nation. In Florida, as in other remote and sparsely settled U.S. states and territories, USFC efforts helped connect the peninsula to the national economy through its fisheries. The construction of red snapper as a national fish and its producers as respectable citizens occurred through the conveyance of this heretofore peripheral species to northern metropolitan centers. Integrating Florida more fully into the post-war nation also occurred through the opposite direction: as red snapper and other commodities moved northward, people and ideas moved southward.

The product of conscious efforts to boost Florida’s population and enterprise, this movement was an explicit attempt on the part of governmental and business institutions, as well as individual settlers, to fill the putatively empty space of the peninsula in order to steer it towards a more recognizably U.S. identity. This was a component of the larger late-nineteenth century project of imagining for the United States a homogeneous national culture and character. During the post-Civil War period of reunification, discourses of American revitalization were prominent in government publications and in the popular media. Progress towards higher levels of civilization was measured in terms of population density, levels of productive activities linked to national markets, disciplined work regimes, and development of orderly communities and patriarchal family structures in the home. With Anglo-American identity positioned at the summit of an evolutionary hierarchy, the “discrete racial-cultural groups of people” that inhabited
the United States and its imperial possessions were assessed in terms of their capacity to advance towards this understanding of what it meant to be civilized.244

At the close of the Civil War, Florida presented a cipher to the reunified nation. In the guidebook the Atlantic Coast Rail Line commissioned him to write in 1875, Sidney Lanier suggested that the physical shape of Florida suggested indeterminacy: the state’s “very peninsular curve terminates the United States in an interrogation point.”245 The state’s position as the southern frontier of Georgia and Alabama seemed to invite the large-scale production of cash crops, and yet much of its terrain remained a sandy and swampy wilderness, plagued by yellow fever and malaria. And while its tropicality appealed to investors and travelers, Florida’s liminal position between the North American continent and the Caribbean basin continued to trouble its national identity: culturally and biogeographically, the late-nineteenth century peninsula was in but not entirely of the United States.

One goal of the early nineteenth century Americanization of Florida had been to remove such ambiguity once and for all by firmly joining the territory to the “plantation belt” states of Mississippi, Alabama, Louisiana, Tennessee, Arkansas, and Eastern Texas. For ten of the forty years between territorial status and secession, the peninsula was beset by the U.S. campaign of ethnic cleansing against Seminoles and maroon blacks. Prosecuted by both the U.S. military and waves of Anglo-American settlers, this brutal and protracted “quest for land and dominion” was framed within republican ideologies of frontier expansion as the birthright of white citizens. At the same time, the violent terror of this period complicated the antebellum incorporation of the region into the southeastern U.S. slave-based economies. While the population of enslaved people in Florida increased from 25,717 in 1840 to 61,745 in 1860 (about 47 and 44 percent of the total population, respectively), and production of cotton and other export crops boomed,

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the plantation region was geographically limited, largely concentrated in the region
dubbed “Middle Florida,” the panhandle counties between the Suwannee and the
Apalachicola Rivers.246

With the exception of the sugar plantations established along the Manatee River
in the 1840s, most of south Florida’s sparse population was engaged in wrecking, fishing,
maritime trade, hunting, and timbering, with open-range cattle ranching—by white
settlers rather than Seminoles—increasingly part of the mix. Wild species of flora and
fauna dominated the state and the vast river of grass that covered the southern portion
of the peninsula continued to confound Anglo-American development schemes. Thus, by
the time Florida was readmitted into the nation in 1868, the ideological conflation of
ideals of republican freedom with territorial expansion through white settlement had deep
roots in the state, but little of the peninsula had been cleared, drained, and shaped into a
cultivated middle ground.247

In light of the industrialization and urban growth that characterized the Gilded
Age, lack of population generally was interpreted as a sign of cultural deficiency for
which emigration provided a plausible solution. With an estimated 187,748 inhabitants in
1870, the post-war population of Florida grew at a rapid pace; two decades later, the

246 Edward E. Baptist, Creating an Old South: Middle Florida’s Plantation Frontier
belt,” 2. C.S. Monaco, “Alachua Settlers and the Second Seminole War,” Florida
Historical Quarterly 91, no. 1 (Summer 2012): “quest for land and dominion,” 32. For
enslaved population figures, see “Compendium of the Enumeration of the Inhabitants and
Statistics of the United States From the Returns of the Sixth Census (1840)”
(Washington, DC: Department of State, 1841) and “Population of the United States in
1860, Compiled from the Original Returns of the Eight Census” (Washington, DC:
from the late 1800s to 1908,” Tequesta 63 (2003): 5-36. Julia Floyd Smith, Slavery and
Plantation Growth in Antebellum Florida, 1821-1860 (Gainesville: University of Florida
South Florida Flatwoods,” Florida Historical Quarterly 62, no. 2 (October 1983): 180-
193. Solomon Otto, “Florida’s Cattle-Ranching Frontier: Manatee and Brevard Counties
Paradise.” Cathy Matson and Peter Onuf, “Toward a Republican Empire: Interest and
Ideology in Revolutionary America,” American Quarterly 37, no. 4 (Autumn 1985): 496-
531.
Census counted 391,422 people: an increase of 108 percent. Nevertheless, Florida had a long way to go in the eyes of those who defined national progress in terms of individual enterprise, agricultural and industrial development, and increasing aggregations of people.

In 1890, when the U.S. Census Bureau famously declared that the frontier line between wilderness and settlement was minimal enough to be no longer worth reporting on, about one quarter of Florida lands contained no more than two people per square mile, therefore appearing as “Vacant Spaces on the Density Map” of the nation. Throughout the United States, Census officials wrote, such vacant spaces were inhabited by a “petty population...made up of the solitary ranchman, trapper, or fisherman, or of mining parties, lumber camps, and the like.” For the most part, those Florida lands that lay within the “limits of settlement” contained eighteen or fewer people per square mile, demographics that corresponded with rudimentary levels of agricultural development. In Census terms, this meant that in an era of “progress and achievement unequaled in the world’s history,” Florida persisted in “an early stage of settlement,” lagging much further behind the industrious Northern states relative to its Southern neighbors. Within this discourse, a key marker of Florida’s backwardness was the adaptation of its denizens to the “swampy and difficult [to] access” terrain through fishing, hunting, foraging, and small-scale farming. Such modes of life did not correspond to the narratives of teleological progress that underlay the late-nineteenth century dream of cultural cohesion linked to entrepreneurial success.

Florida’s sparse population and lack of infrastructure also presented opportunities for adventurous, business-minded souls, however. Echoing U.S. Fish Commission texts and practices, publications promoting the state were infused with a centralizing emphasis. Expanded natural resource production, aquatic and terrestrial, would yield financial rewards while helping to integrate the state into nationalizing markets and the dominant Anglo-American cultural landscape. In large part the efforts to promote Florida as a site for settlement and investment were undertaken by the Commissioner of Immigration, a

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position mandated by the 1868 Florida Constitution. By 1885, the Bureau of Immigration was housed within the newly created Florida Department of Agriculture. The goal of this organization essentially was to attract a white labor pool from Europe and from Northern states to substitute for the state’s increasingly mobile and assertive African American population as well as the resident population of poor whites. The promotional materials produced by the Bureau, and by private companies and individual travelers, verbally and visually represented the peninsula as an undeveloped and uncivilized frontier offering virtually unlimited opportunities for investment of capital and personal energy, much of it in citrus and other forms of tropical agriculture.  

**Antebellum Immigration Schemes**

Since the early territorial period, the process of Americanizing the peninsula rested on the argument that settlement, private land ownership, and improvement of putatively neglected spaces through agricultural production were moral and economic virtues. Florida’s Armed Occupation Act of 1842, successfully championed in the U.S. Congress by Missouri Senator Thomas Hart Benton, provides the best antebellum example of organized attempts to acclimatize a circumscribed set of people, plants, and practices to the region. In an obverse turn from the Spanish sanctuary policies of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, which encouraged black immigration into the peninsula as a buffer against Anglo-American encroachment, the 1842 policy promoted white settlement as a wedge against Seminoles and blacks who were resisting removal. Having opened up a 200,000-acre region south of Gainesville and north of the Peace River for settlement, the act granted parcels of 160 acres to white male heads of families, with their wives eligible for an additional parcel; to white female heads of households; and to adult, single white men. In exchange, the settlers were expected to bear arms

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against the Seminole and black fighters, to build a house “fit for the habitation of man,” and to “clear, enclose and cultivate” a minimum of 5 acres for five years.\textsuperscript{251}

For its proponents, the Armed Occupation Act promised multiple improvements to Florida’s physical shape and social structure. Cadastral systems of registering and apportioning terrain would help reclaim land from open-access wilderness and broaden the system of private property rights in the state. An enlarged population engaged in widespread agricultural production also would enhance the physical and fiscal infrastructure of the region and help push the territory towards statehood. At the same time, the process of cultivating crops and constructing permanent homes would act as a socializing agent vis-à-vis the unsettled folk who lived in easily-replaceable palmetto-thatched dwellings, maintaining themselves with the fruits of the state’s waterways, forests, and fields. In addition, granting land to “the wives of settlers” was thought to exert a “salutary influence in effecting permanent settlement,” by virtue of “bind[ing] the settlers to the soil,” as Representative Samuel Stockley of Ohio put it.\textsuperscript{252} As part of an occupying army of settlers within what was represented as a savage realm, white women and children were intended to serve as a civilizing anchor for nuclear family units.

The 1842 policy thus promoted a number of bourgeois ideals, providing an example of the nineteenth century process of “manifest domesticity,” wherein the sphere of white womanhood, founded on notions of Anglo-Saxon superiority, was employed as an instrument of national expansion and imperial conquest. Through the Armed Occupation Act, gendered notions of white supremacy were used first to mark the quasi-foreign space of Florida as alien, and second to render it safe and amenable for incorporation into the domestic body of the nation.\textsuperscript{253} In an 1840 speech to the Senate in

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{252} \textit{Congressional Globe} 27\textsuperscript{th} Congress (July 18, 1842): 764-765.
\end{footnotesize}
support of the Act, Benton proclaimed that the sounds of rooster, dog, axe, and rife emanating from white, agrarian, patriarchal households would sicken the “heart of the Indian[s]” and thereby hasten their removal. The Senator also claimed that a suitably populated Florida would serve as “the salient angle” to protect the U.S. South from the imagined specter of slave uprisings inspired by the newly emancipated British West Indies: “Unoccupied by us, and…there [in Florida] the lever would fulcrum which is to raise the black population of the South.” Not the presence of the army but of the armed agricultural household, peopled by Anglo-American family units, Benton argued, “announces the dominion—the permanent dominion—of the white man.”

Preceding the U.S. Homestead Act by two decades, the Florida Armed Occupation Act was a step toward fulfilling Benton’s dream of expanding Anglo-American occupation throughout the North American continent.

Support for the policy also came from some resident white Floridians. In 1838, the horticultural experimenter Henry Perrine, who had settled with his family on Indian Key, advised the House of Representatives Committee on Agriculture that “a dense population of small cultivators” in southern Florida would provide “a well-garrisoned bulwark against invasion in every shade and shape.” While domesticating “the mangrove thickets of the coast, the miry marshes, pestilential swamps, and impenetrable morasses of the interior” of southern Florida, Perrine argued, an expanded population of white farmers would plant the seeds of civilization as well as crops. The House Committee concurred with Perrine’s estimation. Were the terrain to remain “uninhabitable by the white man,” it would persist as a series of “impregnable fortresses for fugitive negroes and piratical outlaws,” a class of people considered “still more dangerous enemies to the tranquility of our southern States than the actual savage Seminoles.” For some members of the planter class of Middle Florida, “white race traitors” were among the class of outlaws to be feared within the peninsula, as they contributed to the overall destabilization of racial hierarchies by forming alliances with Seminoles and self-emancipated blacks. Provided with arms and ammunition, Perrine boasted, the “actual

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residents of Key Vacas and Indian Key” could protect the region, allowing U.S. troops to
be withdrawn from south Florida.255

Though the Armed Occupation Act facilitated the expansion of the number and
the range of white households in southern Florida, it fell short of its goals. After all the
requests for land had been reviewed, about 95 percent of the available land was
distributed to 1,184 applicants, including several female heads of families who were able
to prove that they had sons or enslaved laborers capable of bearing arms and working the
land. Many of these did not remain for the stipulated five years, as they proved unable to
cope with the heat, insects, and water-logged qualities of the terrain.256

Nevertheless, the Act helped elucidate the boundaries of “whiteness” as a primary
criterion for citizenship, coming on the heels of what Key West Customs Collector
William Whitehead described as “recent laws against all who did not bear indubitable
evidence of having nothing but white blood in their veins.” Ten years before the Act was
passed, the Territory’s Legislative Council had banned free blacks from migrating into
Florida, a policy that was contested by some and vigorously upheld by others. This was
coupled by Florida’s implementation of the federal Indian Removal Act of 1830. Though
this aggressive policy of ethnic warfare specifically targeted Seminole Indians and black
maroons, it additionally compelled the forced emigration of Spanish Indians associated
with coastal fisheries, as explored in the first chapter. The 1830s and 1840s campaigns to
purge from the peninsula those deemed not indubitably white also deterred the
immigration of indigenous people from elsewhere in the Americas, such as Mexico.257

255 S. Doc. 300-25 at 5, 2 (1838). For “white race traitors,” see Baptist, Creating an Old
South, 158-159. For Perrine’s claims that settlers could defend the region, see “A Letter
by Dr. Henry Perrine (July 17, 1840),” Tequesta 39 (1979): 32-33. Three weeks after
writing that letter, Perrine and six others were killed during an Indian raid on Indian Key:
Florida,” Tequesta 2 (1942): 16-24. Dorothy Dodd, “Jacob Houseman of Indian Key,”
Act of 1842.” James J. Miller, An Environmental History of Northeast Florida
257 Whitehead’s “nothing but white blood” comment and the Indian removal policy’s
effect of thwarting of Henry Perrine’s desire to import “native Indians of Mexico” into
southern Florida are in Thelma Peters, ed., “William Adee Whitehead’s Reminiscences of
Key West,” Tequesta 25 (1965): 32. “No. 94, An Act to Prevent the Future Migration of

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Florida’s Armed Occupation Act and other antebellum immigration policies thus functioned as gatekeeping regimes, intended to whiten and Anglicize the peninsula while solidifying its geographic and cultural identity as a wholly North American space, despite its fluid maritime edges and threatening meridional leanings. This and subsequent immigration schemes provided dominant social groups with a means for articulating the desired composition of the body politic as well as practical and symbolic boundaries of exclusion from it.²⁵⁸

**Ambiguous Boundaries of Whiteness**

In addition to excluding people of color, the parameters of white citizenship had implications for people of northern European descent whose phenotypic characteristics classified them as “white” but whose cultural attributes deemed them outside the bounds of propriety. Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, poor white settlers, typically known as Crackers, accommodated themselves to the Florida environment through itinerant occupations and provisioning activities, much in the manner of Seminoles and black maroons. In addition to cultivating small plots of corn, pumpkins, sweet potatoes and other staples, all of these social outsiders—red, black, white, and mixed—made use of the terrestrial and aquatic common spaces of the region to provide

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themselves with locally abundant fish, reptiles, small game animals, coontie root, swamp cabbage, and a variety of other wild foods.  

With fishing as a means to provide both subsistence and income, mullet continued to be a key source of protein that could be obtained relatively easily. Salted, sun dried, or broiled, mullet and its roe were dietary staples for Crackers during the mid-nineteenth century, as reported by the *New York Times* correspondent who visited the state in 1876. When Colonel George F. Thompson, inspector for the Reconstruction-era Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, visited Sarasota Bay on Christmas Eve in 1865, he noted with disgust that breakfast consisted of “stinking salt fish and bread!!!” Many travelers to Florida in the decades following the Civil War observed the ubiquity of cast nets for catching mullet in the state: it was an “almost indispensible Florida institution” for catching mullet for home use, which anyone who had ever fished in the state knows “are the fish of the country,” wrote a man who called himself Major Sarasota in an 1876 letter published in *Forest and Stream*. After having visited the state in the 1880s, prominent ichthyologist George Browne Goode reflected that mullet fishing during the summer—“when the Mullet is the best food and easily obtained”—was a long-standing practice in Florida and that salting mullet for home use, and to a much lesser extent for sale, was widespread.  

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Such adaptations by Florida Crackers to the environmental systems of the region for dietary and household needs, rather than reliance on extensive agricultural cultivation, represented an affront to the notion of national progress and perfectibility. American politicians and business leaders who concerned themselves with increasing and improving Florida’s population during the nineteenth century followed the centuries-old Euro-American practice of positioning societies or particular groups on “a temporal slope, a stream of Time—some upstream, others downstream.” These taxonomies of identifiable stages of human progress towards increasing levels of civilization began with savagery and culminated in sophisticated levels of commerce and manufacturing.261

Within such schemas, agriculture occupies early or mid-level positions, depending on the scale of marketing involved, whereas hunting, fishing, and foraging accomplished by disaggregated groups of people using simple tools always serve as markers of primitive development. For nineteenth century travelers to Florida from Europe and Northern states—as for the Census officials cited earlier—the transient lifestyles, relative dearth of crop cultivation, and absence of settled domestic arrangements common to Florida’s Crackers, Indians, and free blacks thus represented not only laziness, but retarded human development. Demonstrations of “savagery” were expected among non-white peoples, who were ranked as essentially primitive. Evidence of such backwardness among people whose Anglo-Saxon roots generally were not in dispute, however, constituted a troubling affront to the boundaries of whiteness.262


Because of their disregard for legal authority, along with their perceived contentment with a backward manner of life, Florida’s Cracker population had been grouped among the undesirable denizens of the region since the Spanish occupation. In 1790, Don Vincente Manuel de Zéspedes y Velasco, who had served as the Spanish Governor of Florida during the previous decade, used the term “cracker” to describe a “species of white renegade” whose “nomadic” lifestyles, impermanent housing, and absence of property-accumulation he likened to Arabs in North Africa and the “savage” native peoples of North America. Only skin tone, language, and “the superiority of their depraved cunning and untrustworthiness,” Zéspedes wrote, distinguished Crackers from Indians.263 With an eye towards the potential social utility each component of the new U.S. territory might contribute to the nation, American visitors to Florida after the change of flags wrote extensively of the state’s geography, climate, plant and animal life, and social structure. Within these narratives, Crackers universally were classified as lawless outsiders who were unable or unwilling to assist in the physical and social development of the region. According to the French naturalist François-Louis Comte de Castelnau, who traveled through northern Florida in 1837 and 1838, most of the poor whites in the territory were “squatters” who tended to “settle in the first place that they find vacant,” rather than attempting to ascertain or establish legal ownership. Castelnau also commented on the close contact and cultural affinity between itinerant whites and the “savages” of the peninsula.264

Some twenty years later, the Scottish businessman James Stirling took issue with the “unprogressive” nature of the Southern white “labouring class” as a whole, who preferred to fish and hunt rather than “work like a nigger.” Stirling found the Crackers of Florida particularly distressing. Creating a “Paradise [for] an idle man,” the climate of the state allowed the “easy, lazy, good-for-nothing kind of life” that poor whites exhibited throughout the South to reach its climax. Undiscriminating about shelter and clothing, the Florida “cracker,” Stirling wrote, “need not buy land at all—he may squat and take his

chance of being turned out.” Such dissolute lifestyles led to a paucity of agricultural improvement throughout the state. Like the Seminoles and free blacks who inhabited the backcountry of the peninsula, Crackers were content to subsist on the products of fishing, hunting, and “scratching the ground” for a paltry supply of sweet potatoes or Indian corn.265 As had earlier commentators, Stirling stipulated that it was up to Northern immigrants—as investors and as workers—to realize the fortunes that might be made.

Perversely rejecting the behavioral norms associated with dominant definitions of whiteness, Crackers occupied an ambiguous zone in the social hierarchy employed by European and Anglo-American people of stature. The widespread absence of clear racial boundaries in Florida that Stirling observed just four years prior to the start of the Civil War led him to conclude that the state would fail to serve as a “land of promise for the Anglo-Saxon pioneer. For generations to come it must be a wilderness, the hunting-ground of the Seminole, and the haunt of ‘crackers’ and alligators.”266 In all respects except skin tone and ethnic bloodlines, the white squatters were ranked in closer proximity to people of color—or even to reptiles—than to Anglo-Saxons. Because of their perceived unwillingness to perform steady, manual work, Crackers in some regards were classified lower than black people, whose labor—violently coerced with legal and social sanction—was the backbone of crop production and market development in the South. Neither subject to such oppression nor willingly compliant with the disciplined work regimes expected of wage laborers, itinerant whites in Florida and throughout the southeastern United States marked the boundaries of morality and social propriety.267

The close relationship of Florida Crackers to the ecosystems of the region also delineated the margins of civilization within this frontier state. In a letter published by the De Bow’s Review in 1861, an anonymous Marion County planter described the region in which he and other “intelligent planters” lived as an outpost of respectability, complete with boarding house, Methodist Church, a small school, twice-weekly mail service, railways in the offing, and a spring for bathing and rejuvenation. Replicating familiar

265 James Stirling, Letters from the Slave States (London: John W. Parker and Son, 1857), 222-226.
266 Stirling, Letters from the Slave States, 226.
tropes of Southern indolence and backwardness, the planter described the surrounding country as inferior: flat, wet, and well adapted to “the habits of a lazy man.” It was true, he conceded, that the long-term inhabitants appeared to be healthy; that the land was highly suitable for growing the sweet potatoes, cow peas, peanuts, and corn that such people relied on as staple foods; that fish and game were abundant and cattle and pigs were easily raised; and that all of that amounted to a “substantial living.” The problem, he argued, was that these elements of livelihood were “obtained with very little labor” and that “the privileges and immunities of squatter sovereignty” prevailed. Coastal regions likewise were characterized by inertia: though the waters were replete with “a variety of excellent fish,” the resident people were “too indolent” to develop profitable enterprises from seafood, the writer observed, adding wistfully that annual fishing trips during the Lenten season allowed Yankee captains to carry on a “profitable business” with Cuba.268

Similar assessments of Florida and its long-term white denizens continued after the Civil War. Edward King, a Massachusetts native who traveled throughout the South in 1875 on assignment for Scribner’s, also attributed the unimproved condition of Florida to the laziness of its white inhabitants. Though this “American Italy” was replete with potential resources for development—in the form of fisheries, orange groves, and other agricultural plentitude—the poorer classes of white residents, who might serve as laborers for prospective planters, proved to be “too idle to develop the country. They prefer to hunt and fish, and, as a rule, cannot be prevailed upon to undertake serious work.” As the New York Times correspondent noted one year later, mullet was a primary species harvested, occupying a central position in the economy and diet of Florida Crackers.269

For respectable whites in Florida before, during, and after the Civil War, the ability and willingness of poor whites to adapt themselves to the environmental and

cultural conditions that had taken root within the swampy Florida wilderness was a sign of geographically embedded racial deviance. Such aberrant behavior cast doubt upon the ability of the physical territory to perform as a legitimate component of the Anglo-American nation. Articulating the doctrine of American perfectibility, Florida boosters widely concurred that infusions of capital, investment in transportation infrastructure, and the productive innovations generated by “wealthy, intelligent planters” would cause the languishing state to flourish. Peopling the state with a population that possessed the drive and the means to link Florida to expanding national markets was essential for escalating the pace of the state’s movement away from savagery and towards American civilization.

Converting the State from Within

The project of reshaping Florida into something resembling the economic and social structure of the North through the infusion of Yankee minds, capital, and bodies gained momentum during the Civil War. Throughout the early years of the conflict, Eli Thayer, a conservative Republican Congressman from Massachusetts and ardent free soil campaigner, advanced various plans designed to convert Florida from within by populating it with “an army for defence in the front, and an army of production in the rear.” Thayer’s military colonization proposals rested on the notion of confiscating the property of Confederate fighters and distributing it to twenty thousand white men after a period of military service to the United States. Through their physical and ideological occupation of the land, these men “would be the State” and as such would be able to write a Constitution and elect state and federal representatives who would be loyal to the Union. African Americans from the North and South, including the fifty to sixty thousand “contrabands” for whose welfare the United States was responsible, would serve as a military vanguard and as a labor force.

Though a product of the antislavery political movement, these emigration discourses were premised on the racial and class hierarchies of white supremacy. Before and during the war, the plans developed by Thayer and others specified that fundamental conditions for reclaiming Florida as a legitimate member of the United States were production and marketing systems based on white property ownership, coupled with reliable and subservient pools of free wage laborers, be they black or poor white. As a *New York Times* editorial put it, Thayer’s proposal to colonize blacks in Florida, as an alternative to settlement in Northern states and to foreign colonization schemes, would establish for this labor source “a home on our own soil…without at all displacing, jostling or interfering, with our white population” and without any cost to the federal government. Creating a free labor environment in Florida, Thayer argued, also would elevate Southern “poor whites to manhood, whom Slavery has degraded to the condition of serfs.”

Blacks were to be free, but were relegated to the status of manual workers. Impoverished Southern whites—who might become small farmers or serve as laborers—were distinguished from the Northern property owners and capitalists who were presumed to be the brains as well as the money behind the new, more civilized society that would take shape.

In June, 1862, thirty-two congressmen petitioned President Lincoln to appoint Thayer to the federal position of Commissioner of Agriculture, partly in response to a pamphlet he had circulated in Congress and to newspapers. Apparently written in collaboration with Lyman D. Stickney, the pamphlet was titled “Florida: Its Climate, Soil, Productions, Resources and Capabilities; Also, a Plan for Colonizing the State and Information to Emigrants.” The publication, along with similar reports Stickney produced for the U.S. Department of Agriculture, described Florida as a land of bounty, capable of yielding a wealth of Mediterranean crops such as oranges, figs, and olives in addition to the foundations of Southern plantation agriculture: cotton, sugar cane, tobacco, rice, and

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indigo. Staple Southern foods such as corn (considered “indispensible” to blacks and preferred over wheat by many Southern whites), sweet potatoes, cabbages, and peas were easily grown, and fruits from the north, the tropics, and the Mediterranean were said to flourish side by side. In addition to agricultural production, timber and naval stores could yield profits while providing military materiel, and fish and fowl were plentiful in coastal waters, lakes, and ponds.273

All that was needed for Florida to realize her latent potential was a population of investors and workers. “With that,” Stickney and Thayer wrote, “her deserted fields and waste places will bring rich returns to industry, and be the homes of a happy people.” Like the Seminole War-era Armed Occupation Act, Thayer’s Civil War colonization scheme projected idealized notions of agricultural productivity and domestic harmony as a justification for militarized occupation of “unregenerate,” contested terrain and dispossession of existing populations of people.274

While the wartime settlement scheme was rejected on a federal level, Thayer’s proposals served as a template for post-War immigration plans.275 In effort to lure enterprising individuals to settle in the state as investors and laborers, reports circulated by Florida’s Bureau of Immigration praised the state’s climate, vast acreage of vacant lands, and wealth of opportunities for enterprising individuals. In 1869, one year after the state’s post-war constitution established the position, Florida’s first Commissioner of Immigration, J.S. Adams, began publishing an annual report titled “Florida: Its Climate,

274 Stickney, “Florida: Soil, Climate, and Productions,” 65. See Kaplan, “Manifest Domesticity”: “Although in the reaches of imperial domesticity a home is ultimately coextensive with the entire world, the concept also continually projects a map of unregenerate outlying foreign terrain that gives coherence to its boundaries and justifies its domesticating mission,” 31.
Soil and Productions.” Echoing Thayer’s and Stickney’s texts in title and in rhetoric, these reports were based on the premise that “men, money and labor” were central to Florida’s successful future. In an era of industrialization, urbanization, internal migration, and heavy immigration to the United States from Europe and Asia, Adams’ goal was to direct “a large portion of that outflow of men and means” towards the peninsula.276

Agricultural production occupied first place in the list of enticements to prospective migrants within promotional texts circulated by the Commission of Immigration and individual writers. The lure that was dangled in these materials was the same suite of opportunities that Thayer and Stickney had detailed so fulsomely, chief among them being the growing of oranges and myriad other fruits, field crops, and garden vegetables; rearing cattle, hogs, and other livestock; and harvesting the extensive pinelands for timber, lumber, and naval goods. In one of dozens of tracts penned by private individuals, John F. Bartholf, a New York City native who settled in south Florida after having commanded the Second United States Colored Infantry unit in the area during the Civil War, authored a pamphlet designed to entice his Northern countrymen to join him in the region. Like many other boosters of the state, Bartholf dubbed Florida the “Italy of America.” The metaphorical association with the Mediterranean was inspired by Florida’s sultry climate and the relative ease with which oranges, sugar cane, bananas and a variety of other tropical crops could be cultivated.277

Bartholf’s rhetoric exemplifies the agrarian ideal that underlay nineteenth century Florida promotion. Assuring prospective settlers that “Farming is not hard to learn,” Bartholf carefully enumerated annual expenses and projected returns, promising that “glorious results” would accrue to judicious, hard-working migrants—particularly those who were able to enjoy the “golden showers” flowing from acreage devoted to orange groves. Railways and regular steamship service soon would be put in place, canals would be dug, and the vast swamplands of the Everglades would be reclaimed, Bartholf

277 J.F. Bartholf and F.C.M. Boggess, South Florida, the Italy of America, Its Climate, Soil and Productions. How to Get There, Cost of Land, and Expense of Making a Home and Planting a Grove of Fruit Trees (Jacksonville: Ashmead Bros., 1881).
confidently predicted. With the conversion of empty acreage to productive homesteads, the sound of ax and saw would replace the “howling of the wolf and hooting of the owl” and the wilderness would be transformed into “one vast garden to supply the ‘snowed up’ people of the North.” Echoing the logic of the Armed Occupation Act some four decades earlier, Bartholf’s plan reflected the general wisdom that a dense network of Anglo-American homesteads would be necessary for restructuring the physical shape, social structure, and economic foundation of Florida as well as the look, sound, and feel of the place.

In addition to the profits to be made from fields and forests, the marine and fresh waterways of the state were cast as latent sources of opportunity for enterprising migrants to the state. In his first report, Commissioner Adams extolled the oysters, turtles and “valuable fish”—that swarmed in Florida’s bays, inlets, and rivers, forming a “very wholesome article of diet, and giving opportunity for business in this direction to almost any extent.” Mullet was first on his list. Many of the planters and businessmen whose letters Adams included in the Commission of Immigration publications also described the potential swimming in wait throughout the waters of the state. “To fishermen who understand how to cure fish properly, no finer opportunity is presented than on our coast for a thriving business,” wrote a settler in Cedar Key.

While oyster and sponge fisheries frequently were praised, and sheepshead, sea trout, redfish, pompano and a variety of other fish often were noted, mullet received prominent attention in these texts. In Indian River, “superb mullet” was to be found, and a planter in Manatee County suggested to Adams that mullet from the region could be “put up…to supply the Union.” From Wakulla County, another wrote of 25,000 mullet caught by about a dozen men in a single haul of a two hundred-yard seine; with 250 fish per barrel and each barrel selling for ten dollars, this seemed a promising business indeed: “Think of it! One thousand dollars at a haul,” he wrote. Descriptions of Florida’s fisheries generally combined wonder at the state’s aquatic plentitude,

278 Bartholf and Boggess, South Florida, the Italy of America, 63, 38, 51, 16.
279 Adams, Florida: Its Climate, Soil and Productions, 54, 70.
disappointment at the current lack of development of the industry, and confidence in the potential lying in wait for enterprising, Northern business-minded men.

Bartholf was one of many guidebook-authors who highlighted south Florida’s fisheries as potentially transformative agents of Florida’s economy and social structure, expressing astonishment at Charlotte Harbor’s immense schools of mullet. His awe was matched by dismay that “Spanish ranchos” continued to occupy the region’s islands in the fall to harvest and salt the fish, only to have it “sent by the schooner load to Cuba.” Rather than profligate foreigners continuing to enrich themselves with this marine bounty, Bartholf argued, Americans should seize the opportunity: “A great opening here awaits men of experience and sufficient capital, in the putting up of these fish for the Northern and foreign markets,” he predicted. As evidence of the living roots of its Spanish past, Florida’s trading and cultural connections to Cuba had no place in Bartholf’s vision of the state’s potential as a vaguely Mediterranean agrarian landscape. Echoing the sentiments of U.S. military figures during the early decades of the nineteenth century, Bartholf was eager to replace the liminal edges of his adopted state with clear borders. Florida was to be a decidedly American Italy.281

Anxious to develop new means for generating wealth in the aftermath of slavery, Florida planters and business owners enthusiastically proclaimed their willingness to receive Yankee settlers with open arms. As Cedar Key sawmill owner Richard W. B. Hobson stated explicitly in an 1868 letter to Adams, Northern capital and drive would be central for developing the “true worth” of the state: “We know the Yankees have grown rich and powerful out of the rocky hills and barren lands of New England, and we know if here, they would enrich this much more highly favored country. We say…come one, come many.” Such comments were typical of the responses Adams received to questionnaires he circulated to landowners in counties throughout the state. Using these statements as proof that former Confederates would not display outright hostility to Northern settlers, the Commissioner concluded that all immigrants who pledged

281 Bartholf and Boggess, *South Florida, the Italy of America*, 19-20.
themselves “to contribute to the common good, and assist the common progress” would be “cherished and respected,” wherever their origins.  

In practice, the means by which the “common good” was elucidated in the Bureau of Immigration publications and in other promotional texts reflected the “new regimes of racial subordination” upon which promises for postwar sectional reunion, the development of the New South, and industrial growth were based. The dream of fashioning Florida into a productive paradise united erstwhile foes, Yankee and Confederate, who sought to reorient the state’s immense public lands and untapped resources toward the interests of capitalist investment. The state’s latent opportunities could only be made profitable through the development of a dependable supply of low-wage workers. As W.E.B. Du Bois famously argued, the subordination, exploitation, and violence unleashed by the overthrow of Reconstruction in the South was not only a racial conflict but a “labor war,” which coerced workers of any race to submit to oppressive wages and conditions while ultimately fostering a sense of racial superiority among the white working class.

In the face of active resistance on the part of newly freed black men and women to submit to low wages and social subordination, most members of the “white business supremacy” that took shape in Florida during the Reconstruction period disparaged African Americans as unfit for the state’s labor needs. Real estate developer Oliver Martin Crosby, who moved to Florida from Connecticut, expressed such sentiments in

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282 Adams, Florida: Its Climate, Soil and Productions, 69, 17. In October, 1867, Hobson and his wife Sarah provided John Muir with work in the sawmill and lodgings in the employee dwellings during the botanist’s walk from Kentucky to the Gulf of Mexico. The Hobsons nursed Muir back to health during a malarial attack as he waited for a schooner to take him to Cuba. See John Muir, A Thousand Mile Walk to the Gulf (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1916), 125-129.


285 Ortiz, Emancipation Betrayed, 11.
the tract he published, which aimed to encourage tourism and investment in the state as well as settlement. Warning would-be Yankee settlers that even the most ardent abolitionist would be dismayed by the shiftlessness and lack of honor among “the average Southern darky,” Crosby maintained that since emancipation, the freedman “has no idea of working more than is barely necessary to keep him in pork and grits.” Nonetheless, Crosby reluctantly concluded, the ability of “the African” to perform arduous labor in the sultry Southern environment made him as necessary in Florida as Irish workers were in the North.286

Others among the white elite were unwilling to except even that essentialist argument for black workers in the South. Echoing Crosby’s complaints about black workers’ indolence and unreliability, a planter in Suwannee County wrote to Commissioner Adams about the “increasing disposition among the citizens, I mean white people of course, to do what work they can perform themselves, and employ white labor as far as possible.” Dr. John L. Crawford, a Georgia native who had settled in Florida’s panhandle prior to the Civil War, likewise celebrated the diminishing population of African Americans in Wakulla County: “The African tide is ebbing,” he wrote, “and the indications are that the county will be Anglo-Saxonized.”287 Hailing from the North or born and bred in the South, these champions of Florida’s agricultural promise agreed that whoever performed the hard labor of cultivating crops, the cultivation of civilization in the state depended on a white citizenry.

Making Home, Making Place

As had been the case in antebellum Florida, whiteness on its own did not ensure acceptance within the post-Civil War body politic. In the “heightened racial consciousness” of the period, the placement of individuals and groups on the evolutionary timeline was measured in terms of proximity to the presumed apex of the


287 The “increasing disposition” comment is in Adams, Florida: Its Climate, Soil and Productions, 77. Crawford’s statements are in J.S. Adams, The Florida Colonist, 22.
Anglo-American or Anglo-Saxon race. This umbrella term—a conflation of categories including race, class, gender, religion, and geographic origin—did not refer universally to Americans of European descent, but rather to members of the white, Protestant middle class. In Florida, idealized notions of middle-class productivity and domesticity as embodied by white families of Northern stock represented the hope for the future.

J.S. Adams and subsequent Commissioners of Immigration encouraged Northern migrants to purchase large tracts of land as a group and establish colonies within which the “social interchanges” necessary to overcoming the challenges of frontier life would already exist. By 1884, guidebook-author George M. Barbour observed the evident success of the work of the Immigration bureau, celebrating the “tide of immigration” from New England, New York, and the Midwest that was converting Florida into a “Northern colony.” In a tract published after having toured the state with General Ulysses Grant and, separately, with several state commissioners of immigration, Barbour described the quiet, middle-aged, well-dressed, deliberate men who were settling Florida with their families as “just the class that establish the very best of peaceable, healthy, sound, safe, and in every way desirable communities.” Such respectable people and settlements were in stark contrast to the “block in the pathway of civilization” that, for Barbour, Florida Crackers represented.

Serving as signs of progress toward the domestic ideal, verbal and visual representations of New England-styled social structures and domestic arrangements filled the pages of the guidebooks and immigration promotion texts of the period. Edward King, for example, noted approvingly in 1875 that “the people of New England…seem to have taken Florida under their especial tutelage.” In the following decade James Foss circulated a pamphlet extolling the virtues of Belleview, a town he had helped establish.

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Figure 5.2 Foss, *Florida Facts, Found After a Four Years' Search*, 20. National Museum of American History, Warshaw Collection of Business Americana.
in Marion County, a region in north-central Florida characterized by rolling hills in contrast to much of the peninsula’s flat expanses. Seeking fellow New England colonists to join him in inland Florida, the former Massachusetts resident detailed the amenities of the town: two sawmills, a grist mill, a fence and a canning factory, in addition to a hundred homes, a post-office, two churches, three hotels, and public and private schools. Potential settlers would have the company of “the best society (all from the North)” and, Foss assured his reader, a rumshop would never be present in the town.290

To reinforce these notions of Anglo-American temperance and propriety, engravings of the town’s layout illustrated that the colony was modeled on the template of a New England village. Common to the guidebooks of the period, such images created an “imaginary coherence” between would-be colonists and the visual framework offered by the text, a relationship through which readers could imagine the domestication of the Florida wilderness and the security of their place in it. By highlighting the material and social dimensions of the nascent middle-class structure of life in Florida and eliding features of the place that lay outside of such structures—undesirable people, racial conflict, and class tensions, for example—these representations situated the white readers of such texts as potential settlers of a feasible paradise-in-the-making.291

In combination, visual and verbal descriptions of civilized colonies within the tropical wilderness of Florida helped to foster a sense of inevitability about the state’s destiny as a tamed American landscape. These depictions of bourgeois respectability were coupled with lists of what might be grown in a given area as well as reassurances to Northern immigrants that Florida’s environmental challenges—such as the summer’s heat and torrential rain, the winter’s crop-destroying freezes, yellow fever outbreaks, and


plagues of insects—were manageable and of no greater concern than climactic
difficulties posed in other states. Advertisements for steamship and railway lines
connecting northeastern travelers to Marion County occupy the back cover and inside
pages of Foss’s *Florida Facts*, along with promotions of a fertilizer company and a
mortgage broker. Balancing visions of paradise with pragmatic advice, the discourses of
Florida promotion invited white viewers to see and feel themselves comfortably at home
in an exotic and yet manageable place.

The dream of domesticating the frontier state was brought to life in part through
the construction of railways, hotels and resorts, and planned communities. Dubbed the
“era of the developers,” late nineteenth century Florida saw the formation of Henry
Plant’s system of railways, steamships, and luxury hotels along the Gulf Coast; Henry
Flagler’s Florida East Coast System, with a terminus in Miami; and William Chipley’s
extension of the Louisville and Nashville Railroad Company through the panhandle. As
the opening act in the drainage of the Everglades, which inflicted drastic damage to the
hydrological functions of the ecosystem, the 1881 purchase by Hamilton Disston of four
million acres of state lands began the reclamation of thousands of square miles of central
and south Florida terrain. This massive undertaking set the stage for decades of dredging,
bulkheading, canal-building, and construction of dredge-spoil islands throughout coastal
Florida, inaugurating a “mania for water frontage” that continues into the present. These
infrastructural developments also helped encourage a boom of truck farming in the state,
which in turn helped to stimulate improvements in cooling systems and the expansion of
ice-making plants in Florida and throughout the South. By 1889, the first refrigerated rail
cars of strawberries were on their way from Florida to New York and the state was on its
way to becoming a southern garden for northern consumers, as so many boosters of the
place had envisioned.292

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Mullet, Palmetto Shacks, and the Persistence of the Past

If bourgeois settlement, natural resource production, and a growing tourist economy represented the future of the state, the past was present in turn-of-the-century Florida through the persistence of lifestyles and identities that were enmeshed in the coastal, wetlands, and forest habitats of the region. As framed by the 1890 U.S. Census, such cultural worlds existed within anomalous pockets of vacant space in a country that largely had been “redeemed from the wilderness and brought into the service of man” through white settlement and the displacement of Indians. By 1890, such settlement was so widespread throughout most of the United States that the frontier line had essentially ceased to exist, Census officials reported. In Florida, however, while the unpopulated areas had been reduced, the lack of good harbors, extensiveness of wetlands, and distance from national markets meant that settlement still had “passed…by” large portions of the state. Paradoxically, people lived in these vacant spaces, but in densities too low to count as settlement.293

The conclusion drawn from these Census findings, as famously articulated in 1893 by historian Frederick Jackson Turner, was that the few denizens who inhabited the empty spaces of the United States had not yet embarked on the forward march of civilization and thus existed in the static time of the eternal past. Reflecting on the significance of the vanished frontier, Turner argued that the democratic genius of U.S. economic and political institutions was generated by the continual evolution of every region of the country from “primitive” to “higher stages” of commerce, stimulated by white settlement. For Turner, American social structures and economic systems such as fisheries, fur trading, open range livestock, and dispersed farming settlements were sediments of history layered beneath the present reality and future trajectory of advanced

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the Nineteenth Century Origins of Southern Truck Farming,” Agricultural History 66, no. 1 (Winter 1992): 42-62. “Truck farming” refers not to the mode of transporting goods to market, but rather to mid-size farms on which mixed vegetables and fruits are grown; its etymological roots lie in the French troquer, meaning: to shop, barter, exchange. 293 Porter et al., “Progress of the Nation,” “redeemed from the wilderness,” xxvii; “Within the settled portions of the United States are several which, for various reasons, have thus far remained unsettled…It may be instructive to glance at them in detail, in order to discover the reasons why settlement has passed them by,” xxviii.
commerce and urbanization. Still present but no longer predominant in the U.S. physical and social landscape, primitive economic stages of development served as temporal stratifications. One might read these layers as a palimpsest, Turner wrote, and thus examine “the procession of civilization” and the passage of time itself. In Florida, such temporal flow was impeded by the extensive parts of the state that remained “practically without settlement”—practically, though not entirely.²⁹⁴

The nagging persistence of the past in Florida troubled the certainty with which the forward march of civilization was inscribed verbally and visually in promotional materials for the state. In contrast to the illustrations of houses and villages constructed by the state’s growing coterie of middle-class whites, images of the homes of Florida’s itinerant peoples were infrequent in the pages of guidebooks and other inducements to immigration. Temporal traces of the daily lives of Florida’s unsettled inhabitants are found, however, in the form of archived photographs of coastal, palmetto-thatched dwellings, for example. Produced in the first decade of the twentieth century, the photographs selected here depict some of the living and working arrangements of Floridians who resided outside the realm of respectable homes and occupations and therefore could not “lay claim to a proper ‘domestic’ lineage.” These images illustrate that the centuries-old accommodations people of multiple races had been making to the environmental conditions of the place were extant even as the state was being restructured into a productive, American paradise. With few details provided in the archive, situating these images in what art critic John Berger has called “narrated time” is the only way to recreate the context of the photographs and to imagine some of the human lives that animated Florida’s vacant spaces.²⁹⁵

²⁹⁵ As argued by Laura Wexler in Tender Violence, “those who did not have, could not get, or had been robbed of their ‘homes’ would be…nonparticipants” in the late nineteenth century pursuit of the domestic ideal, making them unable to “lay claim to a proper ‘domestic’ lineage,” 101. John Berger maintains that photographs in themselves do not convey meaning: “If we want to put a photograph back into the context of…social experience, social memory, we have to…situate the printed photograph so that it acquires something of the surprising conclusiveness of that which was and is….Such a context replaces the photograph in time—not its own original time for that is impossible—but in


In one photographic postcard, dated circa 1910 and labeled “Fisherman’s Palmetto Shack, Florida,” a thatched structure sits on the rise of a small berm, some fifteen feet from what looks to be the shallow, Gulf-coast shoreline. Entirely vulnerable to storm damage given its location, the palmetto building would have been, at the same time, relatively easy to rebuild. In the middle distance, a man and a child walk along the beach, facing the photographer and the viewer; each one holds a pole, perhaps a tool. Close to shore, a yawl-rigged fishing boat, about twenty feet long, is anchored in the calm waters. Inside the vessel, in front of the main sail, a person stands near the stern; outside the boat stands another person, shin-deep in water. These two seem to have operated and, perhaps, owned the boat. Their light-colored, long-sleeved shirts and dark pants contrast with the overalls and straw hats of the man and child on shore; this may suggest class difference. Presumably the latter two lived or worked in the palmetto shack, the elder being the fisherman referred to in the postcard’s title: in U.S. Fish Commission reports from the time period, descriptions abound of “palmetto shanties” used in Gulf Coast fishing operations as dwellings, kitchens, and sites for fish processing and storage.

Racial characteristics are difficult to discern in this photograph, as is gender, though the attire suggests that all four of the figures are male and their unmarked race suggests that they may be white. The two floats that rest on the beach in front of the sailing vessel may be small dinghies or holds for keeping fish alive. One feasible scenario that this image depicts is that the vessel’s crew were wholesalers who had stopped at the coastal dwelling to purchase seafood from the fisherman or to barter other goods for fish.

Another photograph, produced during the same time period, depicts a man standing in front of two palmetto-thatched structures, which are perched on a strip of ground between a broad expanse of marsh grass and the banks of Florida’s St. Johns.


297 It seems likely that had the figures in the photograph been categorized as any race other than white—“the unmarked category against which difference is constructed”—their ethnic or racial classification would have been noted in the postcard’s title: Negro Fisherman’s Palmetto Shack, or Indian, or Spanish, for example. See George Lipsitz, “The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: Racialized Social Democracy and the ‘White’ Problem,” *American Quarterly* 47, no. 3 (September 1995): 369.
River. Water fills the foreground: it appears that the photographer, Jefferson C. Ensminger, was on a passing boat when he created the image. The man in the photo, whose race is impossible to determine, is dwarfed by the row of tall cabbage palms that line the river. While the rear structure is thatched on both roof and sides, the front building is roofed with riven shingles, a stovepipe rising from the peak. This reflects greater investment of resources than indicated in the previous image, but it is evident in both photographs that the visible built environment largely had been constructed from local materials. Along the river’s shore lies a small boat, its stern obscured by shadow and water. It is difficult to say whether this is a partially submerged row-boat, still functional but needing to be bailed, or an abandoned shell left to rot. What seems clear is that the man in the photo dwelt in this place and that his livelihood—and anyone who may have lived with him—was derived from the river and surrounding wetlands, and was based, we can surmise, on long-rooted patterns of fishing, hunting, and trading in Florida.

Evoking modes of life in which the natural environment, labor, and home-making were entwined, images such as these provide signals for understanding the cultural systems that lay outside the frame of the productive, American paradise then under construction in Florida. Mullet is not visible in either of the two photographs discussed, but its presence is implicit in both images. Silas Stearns, the Pensacola-based field worker for the U.S. Fish Commission, echoed many others when he observed that “Almost every coast settler in Florida has a cast-net with which to supply his table with mullet,” a good fish that was “easily available” nearly year-round. In George Brown Goode’s estimation, mullet was a fine food fish (tasting like salted salmon when well-prepared), known since “the time of Capt. John Smith” as being the most plentiful species of southeastern U.S. waters, and widely harvested both commercially and for home use throughout Florida. Barnet Phillips, a New York Times columnist and secretary of the American Fish Cultural Association, visited Charlotte Harbor in southwest Florida in 1884, calling it a “god-forsaken country, notwithstanding its orange trees.” Commenting
on the ubiquity of mullet as a regional commodity and a food, Phillips wrote, “I never saw such a pisciverous country. It must be so, for there is nothing else to eat.”

While many residents caught their own mullet, this staple of the Florida table also was marketed and bartered, and the species was by far the predominant food fish harvested in the commercial fisheries of the state, as noted in reports by Silas Stearns and other USFC personnel as well as in myriad guidebooks of the time period. By the 1890s, from small boats or along the shoreline, fishermen were using cast nets, seines, and gill nets to catch the inshore species commercially in dispersed pockets along the Gulf Coast of the state, from the Florida Keys, up through the southwestern region of the Ten Thousand Islands, around Pine Island Sound and Charlotte Harbor, and northward along the coast and westward along the panhandle to Pensacola. Some fishing folk settled in established and growing communities, such as Key West, Punta Gorda, Tampa, Cedar Key, Apalachicola, and Pensacola, which, aided by the development of railways, steamship service, and ice-storage and production facilities, served as shipping points for salted and fresh fish. Others operated from dispersed fishing camps, modeled after the Spanish ranchos of previous centuries, traveling from site to site to follow the seasonal movements of mullet, and building palmetto dwellings to work and live in along the way.

A number of these seasonal sites provided a base from which significant fishing communities would develop in the twentieth century. One of these was Hunter’s Point, a natural harbor within Sarasota Bay, which had been home to ranchos that supplied the Cuban markets with salt-mullet. In 1889, white fishing families from the mullet-harvesting region of Carteret County, North Carolina began settling in Hunter’s Point after having first tested Florida waters in Cedar Key and in nearby Perico Island, at the

mouth of the Manatee River. In 1896, the growing community was renamed Cortez, a village that functioned as a major center for the Gulf Coast’s mullet fisheries throughout most of the twentieth century. Rather than continuing the practice of shipping mullet and other species southward to Cuba, Cortez fishermen began sending their harvests northward to Cedar Key and Tampa via sailing schooners known as runboats and, later, by steamship.\textsuperscript{300}

As might be expected, given the longstanding trading and cultural circuits that connected the state to the northern rim of the Caribbean, a broad ethnic mix of people worked in the inshore commercial fishing industry of turn-of-the-century Florida. The USFC estimated that about three thousand people were engaged in the business of harvesting and marketing mullet and other inshore fish on the Gulf Coast in 1890. Almost 60 percent of these people were classified as white Americans and about a quarter of them were classified as “colored” Americans. Barnet Phillips noted in 1884 that most of the fishermen of the northern Gulf Coast town of Cedar Key—an important transshipment site for seafood as well as a center for inshore fishery production—were white, but black participation was growing, along with overall increases in the mullet industry. According to U.S. Fish Commission officials, Florida and Louisiana claimed the largest number of “unnaturalized persons” within eastern U.S. fisheries. In Florida, the majority of these “aliens” were Bahamian, mostly black and some white, and Spanish, which largely meant Cuban. In 1885, Captain J.W. Collins commented on the “ejaculations in Cuban Spanish, negro patois, and the peculiar dialect of the native white fishermen” that he heard on the Key West fishing docks, while favorably noting the skill with which the fishermen handled their small sailing crafts. A smattering of other nationalities also were represented in Florida’s West coast fisheries, including immigrants from Italy, Portugal, Norway, Sweden, Greece, and China.\textsuperscript{301}


Mullet was second to shad on Florida’s East coast during this period, but it still occupied a significant portion of the business of fishing on the St. John’s, Halifax, and Indian Rivers and the Matanzas and Mosquito Lagoons. While the ethnic diversity along the Atlantic coast of the state was less than on the Gulf Coast, observers did note the presence in St. Augustine of fishermen descended from the Minorcan, Italian, and Greek indentured workers that had been brought to the area in 1768. By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Sicilian fishing families began settling in Fernandina, where they developed a robust commercial shrimping industry. U.S. Fish Commission studies from the 1870s and 1880s, however, classify almost all of the fishermen along Florida’s Atlantic shoreline as “American.” The majority of these were identified as white, but a significant proportion of American blacks were engaged in the industry as well. Goode estimated that about one hundred mullet nets—a combination of cast nets, seines, and gill nets—were being used on the St. John’s River in 1885, most of them deployed by black fishermen using “small boats, dug-outs, and skiffs.” Asserting that the use of cast nets for harvesting mullet and other species in inshore Florida waters was a Spanish introduction, USFC researcher R. Edward Earll observed that while the gear might appear to be a “very crude affair,” it was actually well-suited for catching the herbivorous species.302 Given the tradition of cast-netting for fish in the brackish lagoons and inshore waters of the West African coast, it is also possible that in their enforced migration to Florida and other

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southeastern states, people of African descent brought with them the experience of making and using this simple and efficient gear.303

Towards the close of the nineteenth century, barrels of salt-mullet produced along Florida’s Gulf Coast southward of Tampa Bay continued to be shipped to Cuba, with both Spanish-Cubans and Americans engaged in this commerce. Salt-mullet also was conveyed to inland areas of Florida and to other Southern states, produced by the fisheries northward of Tampa, with Apalachicola being a primary center for the trade. According to Stearns, residents from inland parts of the state frequently would travel by ox cart to fishing centers on the Gulf Coast to purchase salted mullet. Goode noted that while few commercial operations for salting mullet were present on Florida’s East coast, “considerable quantities [were] put up for domestic consumption.” As ice and rail transportation increasingly became available from the 1870s onward, most of the mullet harvested on both coasts of Florida was sold fresh, not just within the state but to Georgia, Alabama, and South Carolina as well. Even with the increased consumption of fresh fish, however, salt-mullet and sun-dried and salted roe continued to be a popular food among some people in the Florida countryside well into the twentieth century. Small-scale experiments in the commercial production of smoked mullet appear to have been conducted in the St. Petersburg area, but this manner of preparing the oil-rich species would have to wait until the mid-twentieth century to become a favored means of consuming mullet.304

While mullet occupied such a major portion of the state’s inshore fisheries’ harvest that by 1915 it was referred to as the “Money Fish of Florida,” its significance always lay in the volume of its production and its affordability as a food, rather than in the monetary value it represented. Depending on the quality of the preparation and the location of the sale, a barrel of salted mullet—which amounted to about two hundred pounds of fish—sold for between four and seven dollars in 1880, a price that increased to eight to ten dollars by the next decade. Individual mullet, salted or fresh, could be had for about three or four cents a piece. According to data that Stearns complied in 1884, mullet harvested on Florida’s West coast was selling for an average of two cents per pound, while groupers yielded seven cents per pound, and pompano as much as ten cents per pound. In a different category altogether were sponge species; during the same period, these “most valuable objects of capture” sold for a whopping dollar per pound. By 1890, the expanding harvest of sponges amounted to just over 1 percent of the state’s fisheries’ output by weight, while accounting for over 40 percent of the value. In sharp contrast, mullet represented over 50 percent of the total fisheries production by volume, but only 20 percent of the value.305

A photograph produced in the Florida Keys in the first decade of the twentieth century provides a sense of the enormous harvests of mullet that individual inshore crews were producing. Close to shore, a fisherman stands in the bow of a small skiff, wielding an oar, with what looks to be a pile of net loaded on a platform at the stern of the boat. Onshore stands a second fisherman, at the edge of a sweep of seine within which a school of fish is jumping. A handwritten caption below the photo reads, “Mullet fishing. The

Point Pinales,” see Phillips, “Some Notes,” 137. For the popularity of salt-mullet as a food in twentieth century Florida, see for example Mable Sims, audio interview by the author, June 25, 2010.
man in boat is drawing shark away from net. 17 tons of fish were taken in this haul.”

Stearns and others reported that mullet harvests in southwest Florida at times would be so large that some of the fish would rot before it could be salted and preserved, even with extra hands brought in from the surrounding countryside to assist with the processing. By 1896, the U.S. Fish Commission estimated that as many as five hundred thousand pounds of mullet harvested in southwest Florida were wasted annually due to a combination of weather-related delays in sail-powered boats returning to processing facilities and insufficient supplies of ice aboard the vessels. The profusion and accessibility of mullet in Florida meant that fishermen at times flooded the market with the species, but the fish “would always be worth something,” as historian Edward Ayers has written of cotton in the post-Reconstruction South.\(^{306}\)

What mullet was worth to the fishermen, however, was not always money per se. In some locations and time periods, mullet fishing crews were paid in wages, but not always. Stearns noted that in 1880 in Ocklockonee Bay, for example, seining crews were paid twelve to fifteen dollars a month to harvest mullet for planters from the interior of Georgia and Florida. In 1887, U.S. Fish Commission representative William de C. Ravenel reported that fish dealers in Punta Gorda owned the boats and gear and paid mullet fishermen about one cent per fish. Others observed that in the Charlotte Harbor, Key West, Hunter’s Point, and Cedar Key fisheries, crews were paid in shares of the total sale. In some regions, handfuls of fishermen using cast nets would catch and preserve enough fish for their families, with the sale of extra barrels of salt-mullet being incidental. Still other fishermen worked seasonally, bartering their labor in exchange for food.307

According to R. Edward Earll, most of Florida’s mullet fishermen were farmers or laborers who were not industrious and failed to operate according to “business principles.” Rather, they worked on a barter system, signing up with owners of small-scale fishing outfits as crew for the autumn mullet runs. These part-time fishermen were paid with a proportion of the catch, which they could salt and use as household provisions throughout the year. This made for systematic and “quite remunerative” operations when the owners of the boats and gear were experienced. When that was not the case, however, the result was that a “shiftless set of men” would gather at the fishing stations. Sleeping and working in “rude palmetto thatched huts” during the fishing season, these seasonal crew members subsisted on corn meal, salt pork, sweet potatoes, and fish, living “in the most uncleanly and disgusting manner,” Earll reported. It was this class of part-time fishermen-farmers whom Silas Stearns referred to as “genuine Florida ‘crackers,’ ” which he characterized as a “wretched lot of men.”308

In his report on the research he conducted for the 1880 U.S. Census, Stearns described considerable variation in the organization of Florida’s Gulf Coast fisheries, depending on a multiple environmental and social factors. For example, the marshy

The coastline of the Big Bend area of Florida north of Cedar Key and south of Saint Mark’s, which Stearns deemed to be “hardly habitable,” was fished by a “thrifty class of planters” who lived along the rivers of the region and owned the boats, seines, salt, and other materials with which the mullet fishery was prosecuted. With the goal of obtaining sufficient supplies of salt-mullet for home use, these planters employed as crew “the poorer classes” of the region, who were “generally white,” and who were willing to exchange several months’ labor for a supply of salt-mullet for their families. About a quarter of the barrels of fish produced in a season were sold or bartered for groceries, while the rest were kept for the planters’ consumption and as payment for the crew. The region’s extensive coastal marshlands and absence of rail connections limited the ability to connect with anything other than localized systems of exchange.309

In the shallow waters at the mouth of the St. Mark’s River, on the other hand, Stearns reported that a group of about twenty full-time, professional fishermen used gill nets to harvest mullet and other species year-round. A railway having connected the port of St. Mark’s to Tallahassee during the antebellum period, fishing expeditions were timed according to both tide and train, as dictated by the only mullet dealer in town, an African American man named Thomas Ellisen. According to Stearns, Ellisen stipulated to the fishermen—both black and white—that he would not pay for fish caught any longer than fifteen hours before the arrival of the train, in order to ensure the quality of the seafood he shipped. Three times a week, the train would deliver hundreds of pounds of ice, such that most of the mullet and other species caught in the fishery were iced down in “old flour barrels” and topped with a gunny-sack, to be sold fresh to markets in Tallahassee, Ancilla, and Monticello, Florida, as well as Savannah, Georgia. Only when the ice delivery was interrupted would the fish be salted. Fishermen were paid three to four cents per pound for fresh fish and five cents per pound for salted.310

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, mullet thus continued to serve as a commodity and a food that bridged a number of social structures. Within the increasing racial divisions and violence of the post-Reconstruction period, Florida’s

309 Stearns, “Fisheries of the Gulf of Mexico,” 553-554.
mullet fisheries employed and fed many segments of the state’s ethnically diverse population, as well as black and white people in bordering states, and, as it long had, people in Cuba. The story of Thomas Ellisen suggests that the business of mullet fishing provided at least some African Americans with the means to establish successful businesses, improve their circumstances, and, presumably, increase their social stature. In an age when proponents of the New South envisioned modernizing and industrializing the region in part through an expanded system of wage labor, Florida’s mullet fisheries blurred the boundaries between paid work on the one hand and, on the other, systems of barter backed up by continued access to common pools of resources within the state’s terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems. Mullet also crossed class boundaries within the rubric of whiteness, feeding successful planters, impoverished Crackers, and visitors to Florida alike.

Mullet as “Florida Food”

Above all, mullet was an egalitarian food. Commenting on the popularity of the fish in Florida and throughout the South, the prominent ichthyologists David Star Jordan and Barton Evermann suggested that the abundance of mullet put it “within the reach of everyone, blacks as well as whites,” which they illustrated by recounting an apocryphal story in caricatured black dialect. When asked by a sickly New Englander about his livelihood, an “old Negro guide” was said to have replied, “‘in the summuh time we libs on de mullet and in the winter we libs mos’ly on de sick Yankee.’” The sports-fisherman William Gregg likewise observed the broad appeal of this fish as a staple, suggesting in 1902 that “the Mullet crop in Florida” was as significant to the state’s inhabitants as corn was to mid-westerners, and so bountiful that it could be caught simply by allowing it to jump into one’s boat. According to a captain with whom Gregg fished, mullet and grits were known as “Florida Food,” a point which he also illustrated with an anecdote related in black dialect. While discussing a bad fishing season, a group of black and white fishermen pondered their summer prospects, when one of the black men reportedly remarked, “‘Well, Ise got money enuff to buy two barls grits, and I can ketch de Mullet wid my cast net, so I kin get along.’” This assessment of mullet and grits functioning as
reliable fallback in times of hardship, Gregg surmised, likely applied to “colored brothers” and “white men” alike.\textsuperscript{311}

At the same time that common folk were eating mullet, upper class people also commended its “toothsome” qualities, as George Brown Goode put it. Jordan and Evermann reported that frying, boiling, baking, and stewing were typical preparations for the species. This suggests that turn-of-the-century mullet had a culinary life broader than the bulk longevity and affordability offered by two-hundred-pound barrels of salt-fish, the quality of which might be suspect, but which was likely to last throughout the year. John Bartholf reckoned that mullet, when full of roe, was “fully equal to the shad of Northern waters.” James Henshall, an avid recreational fisherman who also worked as a naturalist for the U.S. Fish Commission in 1889, agreed, declaring that roed mullet was “quite fat and a delicious fish broiled,” while the fried roe on its own was “a dish fit for an epicure.” According to guidebook-author James W. Davidson, mullet was “everywhere-present and always excellent,” though perhaps it did not quite compare to pompano, a “prince of fish.”\textsuperscript{312}

Mullet provided food for more than just people, however. The enormous abundance of this relatively large herbivore in Florida’s inshore waters makes it a prime food for fish-eating organisms in general. In other words, as James Henshall stated, mullet “is the common food alike of man, beast, bird, reptile, and fish.” In an anonymous letter published in \textit{Forest and Stream}, one of the many late-nineteenth century anglers who discovered the recreational pleasures offered by Florida waters wrote of watching his “fellow fishermen”—pelicans, osprey, and eagles—feed on mullet. Because the


species was so widely consumed by “other fishes... water-fowl and mankind,” he wrote, these “helpless and inoffensive creatures” were “saved from extinction” only by virtue of their prolific numbers.\(^\text{313}\)

Much as mullet functions as an ecological link between aquatic plants or algae and other, fish-eating animals, the species also connects anglers with their desired prey. Most descriptions in guide books and popular journals of recreational fishing in Florida during this time period describe mullet as excellent or decent food, but all of them highlight the use of mullet as bait, frequently including directions for wielding a cast net in order to procure a personal supply. Recounting the newly discovered sport of tarpon fishing, for example, Alvan Southworth noted in 1888 that, for bait, “All fishermen, up to this writing, have employed the mullet alone.”\(^\text{314}\) The species, thus, was as essential to sports-fishermen as it was to commercial fishermen, albeit in different ways.

Mullet connected visitors and settlers to Florida’s aquatic realms in more subtle ways as well, by infusing the sensory and aesthetic environment. Accounts of fishing and hunting expeditions in the state frequently included descriptions of the sound of small schools of mullet jumping in the shallows and large swarms moving out to deep water to spawn, a noise that Silas Stearns and others likened to “distant thunder.” In his 1884 guidebook, for example, recreational fishing advocate James Henshall portrayed Florida as a restorative wonderland, with a climate that could not be equaled “even by the vine-clad hills of Southern France, or the sunny slopes of Italy.” Descriptions of the visual and auditory signals conveyed by mullet helped him represent the sensory ambience of this magical place. Lying on the deck of his sailboat anchored close to shore, Henshall described smoking his pipe and listening to the “leap of the mullet, the plaintive twitter of the coot, and the solemn hoot of the owl.” As the night deepened, the phosphorescent trails of jumping mullet “produced coruscations of blazing jets and flashing drops,” while redfish and trout, rushing after their prey like eagles, “formed dazzling lines and


\(^{314}\) Alvan S. Southworth, “The Silver King,” \textit{Frank Leslie's Popular Monthly} 26, no. 6 (December 1888): 665.
glittering furrows."

For the most part, thus, the place of mullet in the tamed, recreational paradise under construction in late nineteenth century Florida was as bait and as a natural element of the sensory environment.

**The Empire of Sport-Fishing**

For Henshall and other promoters of the palliative effects of recreational fishing and hunting, the sights and sounds of mullet and other creatures underscored the wild and remote qualities of Florida, but this was a wilderness within which a reader—pipe in hand—could imagine being at ease. On the eve of the twentieth century, the South in general and Florida in particular functioned as tourist destinations for Northerners seeking “escape from the distressing uniformity and alienation of mass consumer society.” During this period, the framing of Florida’s waterways as domains for leisure and sources of rejuvenation for the nation’s elite complemented the representation of the landscapes of the state as sites of domestic respectability and organized agricultural production.

Though it lacked the rugged mountains and vast plains of the Western frontier, Florida’s dense forests, extensive coastline, and networks of rivers, lakes, and springs operated as domains for wilderness adventure, complete with alligators and other dangerous animals. A lithograph postcard dating from the last quarter of the nineteenth century illustrates the climate of romanticized danger with which Florida’s waterways and forests were portrayed in the tourist promotional materials of the time. In soft pastels, two hunters in a small skiff take aim at an alligator along the banks of the St. John’s River. Palms and flowers frame the edges of the scene and puffy, white clouds form a backdrop. In the distance, a steamboat—providing both transportation and sight-seeing—

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Presumably circulated by Northern visitors to the state among friends and family back home, the image tempered the exoticism of semi-tropical Florida with the reassuring existence of the increasingly organized network of services designed to structure and fulfill travelers’ needs, as well as the knowledge that this strange place was safely contained within U.S. borders.

Through turn-of-the-century promotional efforts, the state was positioned to become home to transient visitors at least as much as it was being shaped by and for permanent settlers into a recognizable dwelling place. As Frank Presbrey put it in a booklet sponsored by the Plant System of railway and steamship lines, a fishing and hunting trip to the Everglades’ Lake Okeechobee and a boat ride on the lower Gulf Coast’s Caloosahatchee River would give the visitor access to “as tropical, luxuriant and weird a wilderness as there is this side of Africa.” Unlike either that “Dark Continent” or sunny Italy, to which the state was so frequently compared, Presbrey proclaimed, “Florida is almost at our doors, and the astonishingly multiplied facilities and comforts of

travel have made the very journey there a delight.”

Luxuriant and weird the wilderness of Florida might be, but would-be travelers were assured that they could access such exoticism through the frame of a train window or the safety of an organized tour.

Increasingly domesticated and accessible through the construction of hotels, resorts, and rail and steamship lines, fishing and hunting in the state thus offered opportunities for the controlled pursuit of “life in extremis” in contrast to the “airless atmosphere of gentility” that characterized bourgeois life in the industrialized population centers of the North. Guidebooks such as Daniel Brinton’s 1869 publication, which was directed toward “tourists, invalids and emigrants,” promoted Florida as a therapeutic locale for treating a range of diseases, from consumption to childlessness. Outdoor exercise, Brinton wrote, was a highly effective treatment for the “nervous and mental exhaustion” that was a consequence of “the harassing strain of our American life, our over-active, excitable, national temperament.” Combining pleasure with danger, sport-fishing and hunting in Florida were means through which enervated urbanites could seek to rebuild their lost vitality through direct competition with vigorous, natural foes.

The promotion of outdoor recreation, combined with the rapid expansion of Florida’s built environment in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, created the physical structures and social systems that allowed for the emergence of a “sporting lifestyle” that was to become central to the state’s national identity. During this period in the United States, the promotion of recreation in itself was not exclusive to upper classes and the striving middle classes. For leaders in the sporting and outdoor recreation movements, organized leisure activities among working class and middle class

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Americans served the “utilitarian values…[of] socializing children for adult roles and revitalizing adults for more efficient labor.” Within a climate of widespread interest in and demand for increased leisure time on the part of the working class, however, those Americans who possessed sufficient time and wealth could distinguish themselves from their social inferiors through winter vacations in warm locales distant from their northern climes. Seasonal visits to Florida’s growing repertoire of resorts and hotels, following the advice and itineraries outlined in the voluminous body of guidebooks and promotional materials, echoed the Grand Tour of continental Europe, a traditional rite of passage for the British and American elite.  

Tales of aquatic adventure in Florida abounded in popular journals, guidebooks, and as sidelines to publications promoting the state’s natural resource productive capacities. James Henshall’s 1884 guidebook was comprised of accounts of hunting and fishing trips to Florida previously published in Forest and Stream and American Field, influential journals that catered to the nation’s growing population of elite outdoor enthusiasts. A Kentucky-based physician and naturalist, Henshall wrote of having prescribed a fishing and hunting trip to southern Florida to several of his patients suffering from overindulgence in women, horses, fine food and Bourbon whiskey: “their graves were being dug…by the frying pan,” was the doctor’s conclusion. Some two decades later, Forest and Stream published a lengthy overview of Florida’s game fishes, which described tarpon with the language of medieval warfare: the “heroic” fish possessed a “mail of burnished silver,” with which it tempted “the angler to come and match his skill and armor against its strength and energy.” After jousting with such a worthy foe—a “colossal fish” of up to forty pounds, whose “grand and terrific leaps” were “vain attempts to dislodge the hook or smash the tackle”—the angler might then

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322 Henshall, Camping and Cruising in Florida, 1-3.
retire to one of the growing numbers of coastal hotels or angling clubs in order to relax, socialize, and boast with his fellow aquatic combatants.323

Chivalric notions of elevating oneself through combat with a worthy foe were embedded in the terminology and practices of sport fishing. Descriptions of triumphant struggles with strong and wily aquatic species lay at the heart of the many turn-of-the-century accounts of Florida fishing expeditions that appeared in newspapers, popular magazines, and guidebooks. The New York Times correspondent who reported on his 1876 fishing trip to Florida wrote of finally “mastering” a jew-fish and of the dynamic pleasure he experienced by striking and landing one channel bass after another, each one weighing from ten to twenty-five pounds: “for the next fifteen minutes it was jerk, jerk, whizz and reel up without intermission as the…monsters rushed this way or that or stopped to gather strength for a fresh struggle.”324 As many scholars have noted, such sport-fishing experiences, along with big game hunting and other wilderness adventures, allowed members of the modern elite to regenerate an individual sense of self in the face of the “debilitating effects” of industrial capitalism and urbanization during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.325

Comparison with others was an essential component of distinguishing oneself through sport-fishing; one had to see and be seen. The Forest and Stream writer who pitied the helpless mullet for being the prey of fish, birds, and people alike described pursuing channel bass with his companions, for example: after a twenty-minute fight, he

324 L.S.K., “Fishing in Florida.”
wrote, “my bass turned over and gave up the battle…S. secured his in about half an hour or so…Mine weighed thirty pounds, and my companion’s twenty-nine, and we had taken in all nearly 200 pounds of fish.” As Kevin Kokomoor has suggested, the congenial sociality of sport-fishing expeditions allowed anglers to demonstrate mastery over each other as much as over the natural environment.  

The discourse and practices of sport-fishing also were mechanisms for class distinction. Luxury hotels, resorts, and lodges, many of them connected to Henry Plant’s and Henry Flagler’s rail lines, catered to the late-nineteenth century’s growing circle of elite anglers, but establishing an elevated class position through recreational fishing occurred through more subtle means as well. George Brown Goode defined game fish as “choice” species, “of the highest rank as a table delicacy,” but which could not easily or regularly be obtained in retail markets and furthermore possessed enough “intelligence and cunning” to match their “own wits against those of the angler.” The pompano, which Goode described as the “king of table fishes,” was classified as a game fish not so much because of the struggle it took to land the species but because it was “worthy of the notice of the epicure.” Tarpon fisherman Alvan Southworth likewise emphasized the intellectual components of recreational fishing: in battle with the “silver king,” he wrote, the angler must be prepared to combat the tarpon’s “intellect, ruse, [and] sudden dexterity,” which stemmed from the species’ innate “sense of ‘give me liberty or give me death.’” By claiming victory over such worthy foes, the sports-fisherman stood out from the crowd by virtue of his refined palate and mental acuity as well as through physical strength.

Elite definitions of sportsmanship further emphasized such class distinctions. As articulated in outdoor journals and guidebooks, this set of values disdained fishing and hunting for subsistence or the market in favor of “sport purely for its own sake,” which included an appreciation of the health benefits and aesthetic virtues of the wilderness experience. Charles F. Holder, a Massachusetts native who was the founder of big game fishing, surmised that “a man must be born into” that distinct class of people who

328 Giltner, Hunting and Fishing in the New South, 54.
embody the “ideal of sportsmanship.” For him this ideal meant being a “lover of nature,” practicing “fair play,” and regarding the rights of animals. The big game angler demonstrated these values by risking his life, minimally equipped, through direct, singular encounters with large, vigorous natural creatures. Minimal, however, did not mean inexpensive: “a cheap reel for the fishing is impossible—a waste of time, patience, and money,” the expert angler advised. According to Holder, the chance of survival in a battle with a big game fish lay “on the side of the lower animal,” albeit that the “taking” of the species he described tended to result in the demise of the fish, not the angler.329

For Holder as for other recreational fishing advocates, the values of such sport for the individual fisherman were similar to the affective and psychological dimensions of big game hunting: “What tiger and lion hunting is to the sportsman, the taking of these ocean giants is to the sea-angler,” he wrote. Describing his and others’ hours-long battles with tarpon in the waters of southwest Florida, Holder conveyed a sense of heightened excitement and exhaustion giving way, once the “silver monster” had been landed, to cathartic feelings of happiness and pride.330

Alvan Southworth’s proclamations about the redemptive benefits of sport-fishing went further, providing a window into the late-nineteenth century transformation of Florida’s seascape into an arena within which the individual person, the state, and the nation might prove its worth. Writing in 1888, Southworth declared that as an outdoor sport “the rod and reel [had] become triumphant” vis-à-vis hunting, with tarpon fishing in Florida representing the “transfer of empire from land to water.” The large game animals of the United States, Africa, and Asia, he opined, were on the verge of becoming “creatures of the past,” driven to the edge of extinction through the “rapacity” of man. This left the seas as the sole domain within which the sportsman might prove his mastery, and it was up to the tarpon to “fight for supremacy against man and shark.” In his

330 Holder, *The Big Game Fishes*, “tiger and lion hunting,” v, for the catharsis of landing a “silver monster,” see for example 223, 240.
narration of this epic encounter, Southworth portrayed the tarpon’s energetic but inevitably doomed protest against the “angler’s ken and will” as a means by which the single fisherman could renew a sense of vigor and individuality. Moreover, by suggesting a link between imperial control and the conquest of tarpon and other members of the “lower kingdoms,” Southward provided metaphorical support for Euro-American global dominion over land and sea, a motif that Richard Slotkin has dubbed “regeneration through imperialism.”

The Ambiguity of Mullet

Against such drama, net fishing for mullet could not compete. Outside the boundaries of the regenerative empire of sport-fishing remained those who harvested fish for food and income. Foreshadowing conflicts that would develop and deepen in the twentieth century, in 1890 a prescient article in the New York Times pointed out that sport-fishing and commercial net-fishing in Florida waters sometimes made for strange bedfellows: “The Northern sportsman who strolls into some of the best fishing grounds may be seen at times using a rod and line, in strange contrast to the tossing-up work of the smacks around him.” Though the commercial fishermen netted far greater quantities than the individual angler with his single rod, line, and hook, the latter was amply paid by the enjoyment of landing a gamy fish, the reporter noted. As this chapter has shown, if the fisherman was paid for the mullet he landed, it was pennies per pound.

While Florida’s commercial mullet fisheries employed some and continued to feed many, as a commodity and a food the species supported what was deemed to be an easy and itinerant life, which state and business institutions were endeavoring to replace with enterprising people and industry. Naturally abundant, economically significant, and culturally ubiquitous, mullet possessed an ambivalent social status at the turn of the century.

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century: the species could not be ignored, but neither could it be celebrated as a vehicle of modernist transformation. Socially commonplace and catholic as a comestible—as Henshall noted, “It is the common food alike of man, beast, bird, reptile, and fish”—mullet did not serve to distinguish its human consumers from beings of lower stature, be they people or other animals, the way that angling for tarpon or consuming pompano and other “gamey” species could. That this herbivorous species did not readily take a baited hook and rather was generally caught with cast nets, seines, or gill nets also made it the antithesis of a game fish. Since it fought neither hard, nor fairly, nor at all, mullet did not afford the physical or metaphysical uplift sought by the individual angler, armed with one hook attached to one line in pursuit of a single, noble foe.

Furthermore, the cultural world within which mullet circulated entailed the potential to disrupt the coherence Florida promoters sought to create between would-be settlers and the growing, middle-class structure of life in the state. In the late nineteenth century, progress towards national respectability in Florida and throughout the South was measured against an Anglo-American bourgeois norm characterized by disciplined work regimes, structured gender roles, and orderly homes. These social rubrics served to denigrate those whose livelihoods and identities lay on the fringes of the wage labor system. Perpetually consigned out of the bounds of the common good were those who dwelt in palmetto shacks or log cabins along the state’s remote coasts and in the sandy backwoods, worked itinerantly in sequence with seasonal cycles, and lived off “Florida Foods” such as mullet and grits as well as the many other fruits of the waterways and land. The dissolute lifestyles of these Southerners—white, black, native, or mixed—whose occupational and provisioning systems were closely tied to the coastal, wetlands and forest habitats of the region were associated with the past.

According to the promotional discourses of the period, Florida’s future, on the other hand, lay in the twin tracks of converting the landscape into a productive paradise through northern immigration and agricultural development and the transformation of the seascape into a recreational paradise and site of outdoor adventure. Both pursuits promised economic, social, and individual improvement and both reinforced an emphasis on efficient productivity and generation of revenue. Each theme complemented the other:

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investment in agricultural production, fisheries, and other natural resource-based industries would be a boon to the nation’s growing economy; and leisure opportunities such as sport-fishing simultaneously provided an outlet for Northerners seeking relief from the pressures of modern life while forming the base for a burgeoning tourist industry. Such reasoning codified Florida’s turn-of-the-century seascape as a space that best served the nation, the state, and the public good by stimulating individual transformation and economic progress.334

As a foodstuff that could be bought for little money or freely obtained from the aquatic commons, mullet functioned as an adaptive rather than progressive agent. Though late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century Northern visitors who ate Florida mullet tended to rate it as good or even excellent fare, the unwieldy abundance of the species, combined with its high oil content and the scarcity of ice and refrigeration in southern Florida during this period, limited the national marketability of the species. Instead, it retained a significant place in the domestic economy of the place as a regional commodity and food, the nourishment of common folk. The failure of this primary “crop” of Florida’s inshore waters to function as an agent of progress ultimately contributed to the devaluation of democratic, food-producing waterways that provided income and sustenance for people of little means. As the next chapter demonstrates, these dynamics laid the material and discursive foundation for the eventual transformation of mullet from a staple of the table to a “trash fish” of little use for human consumption, and therefore expendable as a commodity.

CHAPTER 4
TO EAT OR TO PLAY: MULLET IN THE SUNSHINE STATE

Introduction

One month shy of the 1929 stock market crash, over one hundred stage designers and constructors from California, along with seven freight cars of gear, arrived in Tampa, Florida, to make a romantic film called Hell Harbor. From the booming downtown nucleus, the film crew made their way westward to a spot on the outskirts of the city known as Rocky Point, a small peninsula on the northeastern edge of Old Tampa Bay. There they began fashioning the locale into a stand-in for a remote Caribbean port, which was “Once upon a time a stronghold for the blood thirsty pirates, who roamed the seven seas,” as the film’s opening intertitle stated. With its palm trees, mangroves, and crenulated shoreline, along with a significant non-Anglo populace, the Tampa Bay region evoked Florida’s long history as a node in Caribbean trading circuits. Rocky Point thus served as a convincing setting for a tropical island peopled by a motley mix of denizens inhabiting a renegade world with a picaresque past.  

Rocky Point also figured in the visions of those engaged in transforming Florida into a recreational paradise for northern migrants to the state. Four years before Hell Harbor was filmed, the place was featured in a promotional magazine called Suniland. According to its editors, the purpose of this Tampa-based publication was to assist in the “upbuilding of Florida,” a task approached by peppering short articles with ads for fruit growers and fertilizer companies, real estate enterprises, leisure opportunities, and homemaking services. “Picturesque Rocky Point,” the magazine proclaimed, was “full of possibilities.” Complete with sandy beaches, opportunities for swimming and water sports, and a golf course situated less than a mile away, the coastal section would make “a natural setting for an exclusive suburb of Tampa,” where outdoor recreation could

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become a lifestyle. During the 1920’s land boom, waterfronts like Rocky Point were key sites for solidifying in the American imagination the idea of Florida as a carefree paradise and source of unlimited economic opportunity.

The space between these constructions of the state’s picaresque past and its picturesque future was occupied by the everyday reality of life in twentieth century Florida. While tourism, citrus production, and extractive industries such as phosphate mining increasingly dominated the state’s economy, small-scale, inshore fisheries continued to provide livelihoods and cultural cohesion for dispersed coastal communities in the state. With cast nets, seines, and gill nets, tens of millions of pounds of mullet were harvested annually in state waters, to be eaten salted, fried, and smoked in Florida and other Southern states. As the backbone of the state’s inshore seafood industry, mullet allowed people with deep roots in maritime sustenance and commerce to maintain their lifestyles while adapting to changes in the state’s physical and cultural landscapes. As an abundant, accessible, and nearly free source of sustenance available for the asking from the state’s bountiful inshore waters, mullet bridged the worlds of nature and culture. Assessing the shifting social functions of mullet thus provides a means for examining the values—collective and contested—attributed to the environmental systems it inhabits.

Over the course of the twentieth century, alternate visions over the uses and meanings of Florida’s littoral edge vied for ascendancy. Although geological processes

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and environmental conditions structure the parameters of particular locales, space is also a “social product” that is continuously transformed through dynamic processes and conflicting desires.\(^{339}\) The filming of *Hell Harbor*, the hopes for converting Rocky Point into a suburban development, and the ongoing use of that space by residents of the region illustrate some of the economic and cultural values that coexisted, often competing with each other, in a single space. On the one hand, Florida’s waterways continued to serve as occupational domains wherein groups of people worked to generate food and income. On the other hand, seascapes featured prominently in the process of transforming Florida into the Sunshine State, a “capitalist paradise” wherein environmental elements provided the raw materials for constructing a domestic pleasure ground first for the wealthy and eventually for the American middle class.\(^{340}\) While mullet sustained the people and cultural traditions of long-term Florida residents, the species occupied an insignificant place in the development of the state’s recreational seascape. Of low cost and of little value for the growing number of residents and visitors who valued seascapes primarily for the pleasures they provided, the bottom-feeding species corresponded with low social worth.\(^{341}\)

This chapter analyzes the ideological tensions that infused the twentieth-century conversion of Florida’s inshore coastal space into predominantly recreational domains. The devaluation of mullet did not signal its cultural extinction: throughout the century, mullet continued to connect significant segments of the state’s populace to the

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environmental and cultural substance of the place. Examining individual and collective experiences of harvesting and eating the species, I argue that memories of mullet, rooted in the state’s ethnically mixed and rural past, communicate alternative models to the notions of progress through which Florida was reconfigured into a leisure-dominated Sunshine State.

Southwest Florida’s Cosmopolitan Coast

As the twentieth century unfolded, people from the Atlantic rim, the Mediterranean, the Gulf of Mexico, and the Caribbean continued to be enmeshed in Florida’s southern Gulf Coast trading circuits, mirroring the ethnic mix that Hell Harbor sought to portray on screen. Surrounded by oyster beds, fringed with palms and mangroves, and covered with woods, western Tampa’s Rocky Point was home to a handful of people who depended on local fisheries for sustenance and income, before and after the production of the film on the site. Raymond Bolesta, for example, ran a cold-drink stand that was included as part of the scenery while continuing to serve refreshments to the film crew. Bolesta, who worked as an extra in the movie, was part of an extended family whose members included Floridians of Bahamian, Native American, Southern white, and Spanish descent, all of whom supported themselves by harvesting mullet, oysters, crabs, and other seafood for the market and for their households. As recalled by his nephew, Grady “Bud” Albury, Bolesta’s beverage concession was an element of Bolesta’s Fish Camp, a small-scale operation where area residents could rent boats and fishing poles, purchase crabs and fish to cook on site, and picnic in large family groups, a popular pastime for many of Tampa’s black and Latin populace. At least one other fish camp also operated in the vicinity, run by the Hawrsk family, who were of Polish and Ukrainian descent. Other prominent participants in Tampa’s late nineteenth and early twentieth commercial fisheries included the Savarese, Mirabella, Matassini, Boromei, Agliano, Felicione, and La Bruzza families, who hailed from Naples, Sicily, and other Italian locales.342

Southward from Tampa, connections to the islands remained strong. Well into the twentieth century, large numbers of black Bahamians moved back and forth between their home islands and Miami and Key West for agricultural, construction, and maritime work. Likewise, Cuban-born cigar workers, black and white, traveled via steamship between Tampa, Key West, and Havana as easily as people further north moved between New York and Boston. Prior to the arrival in the 1880s of railroads and ice production facilities to the region, the inshore fisheries southward of Tampa Bay were dominated by people with Latin and Caribbean origins, who maintained the salt-mullet trade with Cuba. As discussed in the previous chapter, within the Hunter’s Point fishery of Sarasota Bay (later to be known as Cortez) and on the islands of Charlotte Harbor, groups of “Conchs” (white people of Bahamian origin or descent) and white Americans operated several ranchos. During the early decades of the twentieth century, many of those who fished the waters of Charlotte Harbor had been born in the United States, while one or both parents had been born in another country (for example, the Canary Islands, Cuba, Portugal, Spain, Mexico, the Bahamas, and, for two of the three black fishermen living in Boca Grande in 1910, Africa) or in another Southern state.

For the people in these communities, occupational and everyday life conditions replicated the traditions of the eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century mullet


ranchos. Tariva (“Captain Pappy”) and Juanita (also known as Laini) Padilla operated the best-known mullet fishery in Charlotte Harbor during this period. Born in the Canary Islands and Mexico, respectively, the couple began their life together in Key West, where Tariva plied a schooner between Cuba and southwest Florida. In 1873, they settled in the Charlotte Harbor islands, first on Sanibel and eventually on Cayo Costa. With their six children and extended family, they established a large homestead where they raised vegetables, fruits, and poultry; fished and hunted feral hogs and wild game; and gathered wild plants, in addition to salting mullet for Cuban markets. According to a Padilla descendant who grew up on the island, Delores (“Lola”) Willis Daniels, Seminole Indians occasionally visited the rancho to trade venison for salt.345

Like generations of fishing folk before them, early twentieth century settlers on the southwest Florida coast adapted themselves to the environment. Born in 1901 and raised on Cayo Costa as one of thirteen children, Esperanza Almas Woodring, a granddaughter of the Padilla patriarch and matriarch, remembered the “huge palmetto houses” in which extended families lived as well as the split palmetto stalks they used as clothespins. Attributing her longevity to the quintessential Florida standby, “fish and grits,” another granddaughter, Myrtle Padilla Bell, recalled towards the end of her life that when she was growing up on the island, “homemade sea grape jelly…grits, mullet and Bull Bay oysters were staples of life.” Whether picking mullet from the nets, salting them down, swimming and boating, or gathering coco plums and sea grapes, work and recreation blended together, as men, women, and children alike engaged in the multiple tasks involved with island livelihood.346


As it had since Spanish rule, traffic in Cuban *aguardiente* (raw cane liquor), rum, tobacco, and cigars supplemented the salt-mullet trade. In an interview at age eighty-nine, Esperanza Woodring remembered having handled many of the four-gallon glass jugs that held “*aguadin*,” which she described as a clear, white “lightning...[that] would knock your head off if you smelled of it.” Thomas Lowe, a Bahamian man who worked in the 1890s for the Peacon mullet fishery on the island of Boca Grande, recollected that the Padillas operated an “entertainment establishment” frequented by area fishermen and Cuban sailors. Some of the settlers from the region who camped along the coast during the mullet “run” season to harvest or purchase fish for their homesteads also may have procured *aguadin*, cigars, and other Cuban goods from the Padillas and other *ranchos*. Likewise, fishermen and traders from the “Spanish” *ranchos* traveled inland via rivers to peddle salt-fish, liquor, and tobacco.  

Demographically, culturally, and occupationally, Florida’s mullet-fishing communities along the southern Gulf Coast resembled the picaresque milieu Henry King intended to evoke in *Hell Harbor*, albeit with a significant distinction: these mullet-folk were settled on lands contained within U.S. borders, rather than on a remote Caribbean island.

**From Illicit Intercourse to American Industry**

By the close of the nineteenth century, Florida’s ambiguous cultural character remained, despite its political status as a U.S. entity twice having been confirmed (first as a U.S. territory and state and second through its readmission to the nation following the Civil War). Three-quarters of a century after Colonel Brooke had ordered the removal of “foreigners at heart” from the region in 1825, the prominence of a Spanish-speaking populace within Charlotte Harbor’s mullet *ranchos* continued to be perceived as a threat
to Anglo-American government and commerce.\textsuperscript{348} The perception that the commercial and cultural connections between South Florida and Cuba posed a danger to the integrity of the nation eventually contributed to U.S. involvement in the Cuban war of independence from Spain.

Suspicions about the region’s Caribbean leanings took two forms. One complaint was that the covert trade in Cuban goods evaded U.S. Customs’ inspections and duties. Another irritant to federal authorities was the widespread association between disease and the flow of people and goods between Cuba and Florida. Until the 1900-1901 discovery that the mosquito species \textit{Aedes aegypti} is its vector, yellow fever in particular was thought by many to be a “disease of ships,” generated spontaneously by unsanitary conditions in the holds of vessels and spread through maritime commerce. In 1892, Florida Senator Wilkerson Call organized a Congressional investigation into the connection between Cuban immigration to the United States and the spread of yellow fever and other contagious diseases from port to port. Testifying before this committee, Dr. Daniel M. Burgess of the U.S. Hospital Marine Service (USHMS) claimed that the greatest threat to the nation’s public health came from the “illicit intercourse” between Cuban ports and Southern U.S. states. As a specific agent of disease, the doctor singled out Florida’s “class of light-draft, fast-sailing vessels,” which engaged in a “fair business” through fishing and a “more paying one” through smuggling of aguardiente and other liquor, cigars, fruits and other Cuban goods.\textsuperscript{349}

In southwest Florida, combined concerns over yellow fever and smuggling cast the region’s inshore-fishing communities as an unwholesome threat to the wellbeing of the increasingly American populace. Dr. Burgess maintained that the region’s “fishing

\textsuperscript{348} Brooke to General Winfield Scott, August 29, 1825, \textit{Territorial Papers}, vol. 23: 314.
fraternity,” operating dirty and foul-smelling vessels, traveled virtually without restriction from Cuba’s “notoriously dangerous” wharves through Gulf of Mexico waters to small harbors along Florida’s southwest coast, from the Keys northward to Charlotte Harbor, Tampa, and Cedar Key. The smuggling of goods from the Spanish-controlled island was bad enough without the additional import of infectious disease “into the midst of an unsuspecting people,” Burgess warned. Such allegations continued throughout the 1890s, prompting the USHMS to request patrolling assistance from Revenue-Cutter Service officers in order to stop the spread of yellow fever “by means of irregular traffic and illicit communication, such as is carried on by smugglers and fishing craft” along Florida’s southwest coast. In charge of inspecting vessels for signs of yellow fever and other infectious diseases, the officers of the USHMS Quarantine Station located at the southern tip of Gasparilla Island also were perturbed by the efforts of small fishing vessels to “communicate with a Spanish fish ranch on [the] adjoining island” of Cayo Costa.350

The conviction that Cuba, lying at the doorstep of the United States, represented a “menace to the health of our Southern States” served as one justification for U.S. involvement in the political affairs of the island. Yellow fever outbreaks within the U.S. South during September and October, 1897, were attributed to unregulated commercial exchanges with the island. The perception that the island was a source of disease and degeneracy contributed to the “enabling environment” period newspapers and popular fiction created in attempt to steer public opinion in favor of direct U.S. intervention in the Cuban struggle for independence from Spain. Providing a benevolent rationale for the U.S. invasion of the island, public health programs designed to eradicate the disease at its Cuban source were an element of the “informal empire of the United States in Latin

America” through which the northern nation promoted its economic and political interests.351

Keeping the United States free from Cuban contamination also required federal intervention within the liminal zone of southwest Florida. In April, 1898, the same month that the United States declared war on Spain, U.S. revenue cutters patrolled the Charlotte Harbor islands to ensure that “foreign-born persons” and “Spanish sympathizers,” including operators of fishing vessels and Spanish-speaking settlers, did not damage the underwater telegraph cables which, since 1867, connected Cuba, Key West, and Florida’s mainland. Three years later, Revenue Marine Officers raided the Padilla mullet rancho on Cayo Costa, leading to the arrest of Tariva and Juanita for smuggling of aguardiente and tobacco. Convicted after a trial in Tampa’s Federal Court, the two spent three months in the Lee County jail. Found to be illegally squatting on undeveloped government land, the Padillas were forced off of their homestead at the north end of the island, which had been set aside some fifty years earlier as a military reservation. When Revenue Cutters patrolled in 1902 to determine whether the “resort of the smugglers” was still occupied, the family had vacated their settlement, and Secretary of War Elihu Root approved the destruction of the rancho buildings. Two years later, the site was home to the USHMS Quarantine Station, relocated from South Boca Grande on Gasparilla Island.352


While Cuban-oriented fishing and trading operations in southwest Florida were being curtailed, the investment of American capital and labor in the industrial development of the region was burgeoning. Hamilton Disston’s 1881 purchase of four million acres of state land from the Internal Improvement Board initiated massive drainage operations in the Everglades. The process of converting southern Florida’s massive hydrological ecosystem into thousands of acres of agriculturally productive “rich black muck soil” contributed to the growth of the region’s transportation infrastructure and built environment.353

At the dawn of the twentieth century, the development of Florida’s natural habitats toward the service of infrastructure and industry were an outgrowth of Henry Grady’s “New South” vision for ameliorating the poverty of the southeastern states in the aftermath of slavery.354 According to Grady’s followers, regional industrialization and manufacture of goods, combined with more efficient agricultural production, would modernize the South by simultaneously making it more self-sufficient and connecting it with national and international markets. In addition to citrus and other agricultural production, key business ventures in southwest Florida’s post-Civil War economy included phosphate mining and timbering; commercial fishing; and the hunting of alligators, wading birds, and other wild animals. These natural resource-based enterprises were developed through the fusion of Northern and Southern capital investment and marketing networks and the infusion of cheap Southern labor. From other Southern states and from within Florida, thousands of blacks migrated to the state’s phosphate belt to work in the extraction industry, for example, while local whites were contracted to cut

cord wood to fuel the fires that dried the mineral. In a brutal system of forced labor, hundreds of prisoners, the vast majority of them black, also were leased by the state as workers in the phosphate mines and dredging operations.355

Phosphate mining along the Peace River during this period helped spur the extension of the region’s patchy railway system from the inland, upriver town of Arcadia to Charlotte Harbor, the estuary at the river’s mouth. The lower sections of the river essentially were “taken over” by the phosphate companies through the processes of dredging, damming, and cutting of inlets. In the Peace River Valley, tug boats towed barges of phosphate ore to storage bins along the waterway, where the mineral was transferred to box cars and brought by rail first to drying stations and then to Florida Southern Railway’s terminal in Punta Gorda, a town established by the arrival of the railroad in 1886. Large steam tugs such as the Albert F. Dewey, a ninety-eight-foot steel vessel, hauled phosphate barges to sailing schooners and steam-powered freighters anchored at Port Boca Grande at the southeastern tip of Gasparilla Island, for export to Europe and to domestic ports along the Gulf and Atlantic coasts.356


Southern Florida’s “golden age of railroad-building” during the 1880s not only ushered in the growth of commercial agricultural production and phosphate mining but the development of the region’s tourism industry as well. Henry Flagler and Henry Plant, the railroad tycoons of Florida’s east and west coasts, respectively, famously built hotels at key nodes along their routes as a way of drawing Northern visitors to the state, as did a host of other capitalists associated with the state’s rail lines. As stated in an editorial published in the Florida Grower, the trade journal of the Florida Citrus Exchange, it made no difference whether the state functioned “as the winter garden of the United States or as the playground of a nation.” Either way, the state would achieve “her ultimate destiny” of creating economic opportunities for “keen men of affairs.” Throughout southwest Florida, mining the recreational possibilities latent in the natural environment was as much a way to enhance the “earning potential” of the region’s land and climate as was phosphate mining.357

Designed as sanctuaries from the proliferation of Northern industrial development and urbanization, Florida’s coastal tourist destinations in some cases took root literally side by side with extractive industries. By 1907, the American Agricultural Chemical Company (AAC Co.) had acquired the largest phosphate operation in the Peace River Valley along with the charter to a proposed regional railway, which they renamed the Charlotte Harbor and Northern Railroad (CHN Railroad). Through its subsidiary, the Boca Grande Land Company, the AAC Co. purchased most of the real estate on Gasparilla Island, with the goal of creating “a high class development,” consisting of upscale residences as well as an exclusive resort hotel. Constructed in 1911, Hotel Boca

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Grande joined a host of other facilities catering to sportsmen and upper-class tourists along southwest Florida coasts during this period, including Useppa Inn on neighboring Useppa Island, Punta Rassa’s Tarpon House, Royal Palm Hotel in Fort Myers, and Henry Plant’s Hotel Punta Gorda.358

Both extractive and recreational industries in southwest Florida required the restructuring of the physical and biological elements of coastal environments through dredging, construction, and landscaping. To reach Port Boca Grande on Gasparilla Island, the AAC Co. extended the rail line from Arcadia in 1907, crossing over the sound by means of two miles of steel rail supported by trestlework and fitted with two drawbridges. Four years later, the company constructed a conveyor belt system at the port, which allowed for the transfer of over a dozen tons of phosphate per minute from holding bins to ships waiting at the end of docks extending out one thousand feet. To facilitate the passage of large commercial vessels through Boca Grande Pass, the Corps of Engineers began dredging the bar at the entrance to Charlotte Harbor to a depth of twenty-four feet. Concurrent with these major engineering projects, the hotel that had been built on the island by the AAC Company’s real estate division, renamed the Gasparilla Inn, was expanded twice by 1916, its grounds boasting a casino, boat houses, and a nine-hole golf course. Interior decorators from New York directed the renovations as the grounds were planted with banyan trees, Australian pines, coconut palms, and hibiscus in order to enhance the tropical ambience of the place and attract wealthy visitors.359

Fiction and Reality at the Water’s Edge

Marketing the state’s natural environment required changing the popular image of Florida’s southern region from a dangerous and uncomfortably foreign frontier to an accessible, American destination. Capitalizing on the allure of non-Anglo exoticism, the construction of romanticized narratives based on the state’s Spanish and Caribbean past was part of that process. The ambiguity of south Florida, within U.S. borders and yet outside of the mainstream, interested director Henry King as he sought a site for filming *Hell Harbor* in 1929. Experimenting with cinematographic convention in the early years of sound-film production, King filmed entirely on location along Tampa’s Rocky Point rather than in the controlled conditions of a sound studio. The director’s goal, he said, was to create a “sense of reality, rather than a ‘paper mache illusion’ of a site.” The reality he sought to construct was of a lawless Caribbean locale inhabited by fishermen, unscrupulous merchants, loose women, and the descendents of the pirate Henry Morgan, all a setting for romance between a Spanish-speaking ingénue and an upstanding American trader who rescues her from her murderous father.\(^{360}\)

Between its ambient sounds, climate conditions, and physical environment, Rocky Point proved to be an apt setting for the desired façade. In the process of fabricating the effects he envisioned along the shoreline of Old Tampa Bay, King contended with the ill-timed crowing of roosters, seasick actors aboard rocking vessels, and the trailing edge of a Gulf Coast hurricane, which threatened to destroy the set. The social characteristics of Tampa also contributed to the “sense of reality” King sought. Key scenes were filmed aboard an old, fifty-foot-long schooner owned by the Mirabellas, a prominent fishing family in the town. To construct durable buildings with functional interiors that were used for inside scenes, some materials were purchased locally and some were repurposed from dilapidated homes on the site that had been razed. The filmmakers also made use of existing structures in the locale, including the shed within Bolesta’s Fish Camp “where an old resident had a little soft drink stand,” which was covered with boarding that matched...
other structures in the film so that it could continue to operate, serving food and drinks to the cast, crew, and visitors. In turn, some of the buildings constructed for the film—which were sturdy enough to have withstood the brush of a hurricane—subsequently were used by Rocky Point fishermen and residents.361

Aural and cultural qualities were further dimensions of King’s verisimilitude, beginning with his choice of the Mexican-born actress Lupe Velez to play the female lead. The strongly accented English that Velez spoke in the film, King reasoned, would help create a Caribbean ambience.362 Upon visiting the film production site, a St. Petersburg Times reporter suggested that Velez was hard to distinguish from Tampa’s “beautiful Spanish and Cuban” women who, as extras, animated the streets and filled the dance hall of the fictive village. With two cigar-making enclaves—Ybor City and West Tampa—serving as the “industrial bookends” of the city since the end of the nineteenth century, Tampa was home to a large population of Cuban, Spanish, and Italian immigrants (then and now, collectively referred to in local parlance as “Latin”) who labored in the cigar factories. Afro-Cubans comprised a sizeable segment of the Latin population and the city’s African-American population was significant as well. Area residents of Latin and African descent who played extras in the film, the newspaper noted, were “picked from real life” and their “complexions” so naturally portrayed the populace of the “supposed island” that they required no makeup.363

Performances by Sexteto Habanero as the dance hall’s band added another aural touch of realism to the film. During the 1920s and 1930s, their son musical style, with its Afro-Cuban rhythms, was enormously popular in Cuba and parts of the United States.


362 Doll and Morrow, “Hell Harbor.”

Including this Havana-based group thus was a means for creating a sonic bridge between the imagined Caribbean locale of Hell Harbor and the early twentieth century world of Tampa, with its deep and ongoing ties to Cuba.\textsuperscript{364}

Tampa’s Chamber of Commerce welcomed the film production as well as the trope of pirate-themed romance. In part, the Chamber’s eagerness about the \textit{Hell Harbor} endeavor stemmed from the hope that the production would inaugurate a renaissance in Florida’s film industry, expectations that were dashed by the looming economic depression. The city’s white business and political leaders also may have embraced the project specifically because its evocation of roguish maritime escapades echoed Tampa’s annual Gasparilla Celebration, which was initiated in 1904 and continues into the present. Based on a fabricated version of the life of Juan Gómez, a nineteenth-century seaman and fisherman from the Charlotte Harbor islands, the core of the festival involves prominent members of the establishment dressing as pirates and, to stave off their threat of rampage, receiving symbolic keys to the city from political leaders. Flaunting the wealth and prominence of the city’s Anglo elite, the pirate festival at its inception appropriated the state’s Spanish past as a means for symbolically legitimizing the concentration of political power within an exclusively white business caste at the dawn of the twentieth century. Welcoming a pirate-themed film production in which an honest American merchant rescues a Latin damsel in distress was perhaps an additional means for Tampa’s leaders to celebrate the establishment of Anglo-American political and cultural authority over a terrain with a Spanish past and a significantly Latin and black present.\textsuperscript{365}

\textsuperscript{364} For details about \textit{son} and the significance of Sexteto Habanero in the development and circulation of this musical genre, see Peter Manuel, “From Contradanza to Son: New Perspectives on the Prehistory of Cuban Popular Music,” \textit{Latin American Music Review} 30, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2009), 184-212. For the reception of \textit{son} in Tampa during this period, see Susan D. Greenbaum, \textit{More Than Black: Afro-Cubans in Tampa} (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2002), 257-258.

Like the production of *Hell Harbor*, the Gasparilla legend metaphorically packaged the region’s ongoing history of pan-Caribbean trade, mobility, and ethnic mixture as entertaining elements of a dodgy past safely contained by contemporary American rule. Local family members and residents were well aware of the fictive nature of the narrative. Myrtle Padilla Bell, for example, laughed at the rumors that associated her great-uncle John (or Juan) Gómez with the Gasparilla legend: “Uncle John was many things, but a pirate was not among them.”

For tourist agents, however, it was a useful tale. In the early decades of the twentieth century, G. P. “Pat” LeMoyne, an employee of the Charlotte Harbor and Northern Railway, produced a pamphlet, “The Story of Gasparilla,” which purported to narrate the life of the Spanish pirate José Gaspar, as conveyed by Gómez as a crew-member. A tale “full of the spice of romantic adventure,” the fictive account described the looting of gold, violation of women, and executions said to have occurred at the pirates’ base on Gasparilla Island, where captives were imprisoned in palmetto-log structures along the waterfront. According to the narrative, only the transfer of the territory from Spain to the United States and the arrival in the region of a merchant ship bearing the Stars and Stripes brought justice to the outlaws and peace to the region.

Combined with the construction of hotels and recreational facilities and the introduction of exotic flowering plants, rumors of pirates and their suppression helped transform the southern Gulf Coast into a genteel destination upon which a tourist economy could be based. Marauding pirates from a legendary past added another layer of excitement to the thrill of combating tarpon, mackerel, devil rays and other gamefish promoted by the growing sportfishing industry. These elements worked together to present southwestern Florida to national audiences as a cultural and natural environment...
“out of the ordinary” and therefore of interest to those with the means and time to travel. In 1918, Edgar A. Wright, the editor of the *Florida Grower* (a trade journal of the Florida Citrus Exchange), described a visit to Boca Grande’s Gasparilla Inn. Once a “haunt of a pirate king,” Wright proclaimed, the island “metropolis” of Boca Grande had become home to a world-class winter resort and an unparalleled destination for tarpon fishing, sea-bathing, boating, and golfing.\(^{368}\)

Such rhetoric helped enhance a sense of cultural unity within the upper classes, for whom tourist excursions to luxurious destinations in the region were marketed as opportunities to display elite status. A photograph of dozens of well-heeled men and women, all white, frolicking in the water and strolling along a Boca Grande beach accompanied Wright’s article. In a similar promotional article, Wright extolled the glories of fishing for tarpon—“the king of game fish…Vive le roi!”—and invited readers of the journal to join him in a sportfishing expedition to the Charlotte Harbor area.

Likewise, the Seaboard Air Line Railway, which began leasing the Boca Grande route from CHN Railway in 1925, included the legend of the “famous buccaneer” José Gaspar on the back of its dining car menu. As the “gay yacht burgee” had replaced the Jolly Roger pirate flag, the menu text noted, so had charm and romance supplanted the “sinister activities” that once took place on the shores of Gasparilla Island. Wealthy patrons of beach resorts in the region could be titillated by picaresque stories of yesteryear while not actually being threatened by uncontrollable, swarthy elements.\(^{369}\)

\(^{368}\) Gregory W. Bush, “‘Playground of the USA’: Miami and the Promotion of Spectacle,” *Pacific Historical Review* 68 (May 1999): 153-172. Bush discusses the early-twentieth century process of fashioning Miami into a destination for wealthy crowds. Presenting such places as “out of the ordinary,” he argues, was an essential element of their appeal and creating “cultural cohesion” among the dominant class was a fundamental outcome, 155, 165. For Wright’s comments, see The Stroller, “Off the Beach at Boca Grande,” *The Florida Grower* 18, no. 9 (September 7, 1918): 4-5. For attribution of authorship to Wright of “The Stroller” and “The Lancer” columns, see “Florida Fruit World,” *Sarasota Herald-Tribune* May 8, 1928, 12. The Florida Fruit and Vegetable Association website provides a brief history of the *Florida Grower* publication. http://www.ffva.com/imispublic/Content/NavigationMenu2/NewsCenter/HarvesterOnline/TradeAssociateMemberUpdate0110/default.htm.

The Old South in New Southwest Florida

The turn-of-the-century boom in extractive and recreational industry in the Charlotte Harbor area initiated a new era in mullet fishing, along with changes in the cultural landscape. In 1891, Punta Gorda saw the opening of its first ice plant, situated along the Florida Southern Railway lines and operating only during the mullet run season. Six years later, wholesale fish dealer Lorenzo T. Blocksom established the Punta Gorda Ice and Power Company, which produced twenty-five tons of ice a day year-round while supplying power to the town at night. Area residents obtained fifty-pound blocks to use in their home ice chests but, like the earlier plant, the ice factory’s primary purpose was preservation of mullet and other fish for northward shipment. By the early twentieth century, seafood dealers operating on the town’s railroad wharf included the Punta Gorda Fish Company, the Chadwick Fish Company, and the West Coast Fish Company.370 During the 1901 mullet run season, between October 4 and December 6, the Punta Gorda Herald reported northward shipments of train cars filled with nearly 750,000 individual mullet—most weighing between two and three pounds—along with over 1,500 iced barrels of the species.371

In some respects, the “New South” expansions of the fisheries had the long-desired effect of integrating the ambiguous southern section of the peninsula more fully to the continental body of the nation. Newly established connections to markets in New York, Chicago, Savannah, and other urban centers brought increased demand for Florida fish and with it a “great influx” of Anglo-American fishing families. Like Blocksom and

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371 Mullet shipments reported in the Punta Gorda Herald derived from excerpts reprinted in Peeples, Punta Gorda, 199-204.
his business partner, John Cephas Lewis, several of the Punta Gorda fish dealers were white men who had migrated to Florida from North Carolina. Beginning in the late 1880s and through the 1920s, wholesalers in Punta Gorda and other Gulf Coast fishing centers recruited fishermen and farmers from Carteret County, North Carolina, a prime mullet-fishing region on the Atlantic coast. White and black families from Alabama, Georgia, and South Carolina also migrated to area in order to work in the seafood industry as harvesters, processors, wholesalers, and ice plant laborers.372

To attract fishermen, in 1916 the AAC Co. built 16 wood-framed houses along the railway at the north end of Gasparilla Island, where they previously had constructed two ice depots and a post office, forming a community known as Gasparilla Village. Traveling by box-car, fishing families settled there and in other growing seafood harvesting centers along Florida’s West Coast such as Cedar Key, Hunter’s Point, and Punta Gorda. Platted into a geometrical grid of streets in 1887, the Hunter’s Point fishery within Sarasota Bay was renamed Cortez with the establishment of a post office nine years later. In place of the palmetto shacks lived in by the itinerant Conchs who had operated the salt-mullet fishery, the new wave of white North Carolinians built two-story, white-framed houses along the waterfront.373 The North Carolina settlers of Cortez also appear to have brought with them a sense of racial hierarchy. By the mid-twentieth century, white residents of the town tolerated the presence of black laborers in the fish houses, but threatened them with violence if they remained past sundown, employing

373 Gibson, Boca Grande, 56-58. Edic, Fisherfolk, 44. Hoeckel and VanItallie, Boca Grande, 8. Arnold, “A Brief History,” 126. “Cortez Historic District,” National Register of Historic Places Registration Form, United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 1995. The name “Cortez” for the area of Hunter’s Point seems to have been chosen capriciously by a Washington, DC postal clerk who rejected the applied-for name of “DeSoto” because two other Florida communities had already requested the name of that Spanish colonist, substituting the name of a conquistador who had never set foot in the state. See Gustavo Antonini, David Fann, and Paul Roat, “Cortez: A Working Waterfront,” in A Historical Geography of Southwest Florida Waterways, vol. 1: Anna Maria Sound to Lemon Bay (Gainesville, FL: Florida Sea Grant, 1999), 70.
common tropes of white, female vulnerability to presumed black male sexual aggression to justify the exclusionary policy.\footnote{Evidence of Cortez as a “sundown town” comes from Doris Green, \textit{Fog’s Comin’ In} (self-published, 1992), 23: “Aunt Lula looked out to see a black man sitting on the end of the dock who seemingly appeared to be waiting for someone. She knew there were no blacks living in the village, so she loaded the family shotgun and walked to the man and told him to get off the dock and he’d better not let the sun go down while he was in the vicinity. She knew the men were fishing at night and was not going to take a chance of a stranger prowling around. Needless to say, he didn’t have to be warned twice.” See also quote from an interview with Cortez fisherman Julian Taylor conducted by Mary Green in 1982: “When they first began to hire the colored boys to work in the fish houses, the boys went there and told ’em, ‘Now, when the sun goes down we want ya out of the town, see. You can work in the daytime but you can’t work here at night.’ I’d take ’em in the truck and carry ’em down there [closer to Bradenton] so they’d be out of Cortez before nightfall,” cited in Susan Anne Eacker, “Mullet, Mangoes, and Midwives: Gender and Community in a West Coast Florida Fishing Village” (PhD diss., Miami University, 1994), 109.}

The implementation of Jim Crow-era racist policies was not uniform throughout the region, however. While the development of the fisheries enhanced the Anglo-American milieu of southwest Florida—and augmented collective notions of white supremacy in certain locales—this section of the state also offered a measure of social freedom for African Americans and Caribbean blacks, in addition to economic opportunities. During the first half of the nineteenth century, South Florida had functioned as a stepping stone toward freedom in the Bahamas and other islands. After the Civil War and during the early decades of the twentieth century, the prevalence of maritime occupations and frontier social fluidity continued to attract people of African descent to the region. In addition, the cultural dynamics within the ethnically diverse locales of southern Florida mitigated the legal systems of racial oppression and violent vigilantism that supported the state’s post-Reconstruction economic growth strategies. Within the area—with its distance from the plantation belt that took hold in northern Florida counties—the Spanish legacy of “multiracial tolerance” persisted to some extent, nurtured by continued connections to Cuba.\footnote{Larry E. Rivers and Canter Brown, Jr., “African Americans in South Florida: A Home and a Haven for Reconstruction-era Leaders,” \textit{Tequesta} 41 (1996): 5-23. Irvin D. S. Winsboro and Joe Knetsch, “Florida Slaves, the ‘Saltwater Railroad’ to the Bahamas, and Anglo-American Diplomacy,” \textit{Journal of Southern History} 79, no. 1 (February 2013): 51-78. In his introduction to \textit{The African American Heritage of Florida}, ed. David R.}
Less rigid race-based social hierarchies also were fostered by ongoing flows of people and goods between southern Florida and the Bahamas, where the black population, free and enslaved, had experienced far greater autonomy than in North American plantation societies. By 1900, federal census counts estimated that South Florida was home to 96,000 people, over 21,000 of them African American; in Monroe County, within which Key West is located, nearly one-third of the population was black. During Reconstruction, and to some extent in the decades following, hundreds of African American men were appointed or elected to political positions in most of south Florida’s counties, serving as voter registrars, postmasters, town and county commissioners, justices of the peace, customs inspectors, and sheriff. Many others held leadership positions in churches, schools, and civil organizations.376

With four African Americans among the thirty-four men who incorporated the town in 1887, Punta Gorda afforded a degree of opportunity for black men to achieve economic success and community prominence, at times through connections to the fisheries and other maritime trades. One successful black businessman and community leader was South Carolina-born George T. Brown, who owned several fishing vessels and ran a wholesale seafood business. Having first moved to the area to work in the phosphate industry, Brown established southwest Florida’s largest marine repair yard, Cleveland Marine Steam Ways, in 1916, employing both blacks and whites and paying them equal wages. Another successful African American, Joseph Blanchard, arrived in

Colburn and Jane L. Landers (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1995), 1-16, Colburn points out that “Spain’s multiracial tolerance” exerted influence over “race relations in Florida, in obvious and not so obvious ways, long after the Spaniards departed for the Caribbean and Spain,” 4.

376 Census figures are from Rivers and Brown, “African Americans in South Florida,” 6. For the cultural influence of Bahamians, black and white, in Key West and southern Florida, see Astrid Melzner Whidden, “Links Across the Gulfstream: The Florida/Bahamas Zone, 1780-1900” (PhD diss., Florida International University, 2007). Susan Shumaker suggests that many of the black Bahamians who migrated to South Florida after the Civil War were formerly enslaved people who had escaped from the United States to the islands via Key Biscayne. Susan Shumaker suggests that many of the black Bahamians who migrated to South Florida after the Civil War were formerly enslaved people who had escaped from the United States to the islands via Key Biscayne; see “Israel Lafayette ‘Parson’ Jones, Sir Lancelot Jones, and Biscayne National Park,” in Untold Stories from America’s Nation Parks, Part 3, 47 No. 2, Public Broadcasting Service: www.pbs.org/nationalparks/untold-stories/.
the town in 1910 to work as a steamboat pilot and fisherman. Although both of these men seem to have spent some time fishing, blacks who lived along Florida’s Gulf Coast more often found jobs in seafood processing and marketing than in harvesting fish.377

Faced with changes in the region’s demographic and economic character, existing fishing communities in southwest Florida accommodated themselves to social circuits oriented northward, rather than towards Cuba. By 1904, after their release from jail and a temporary relocation of the household to the Clearwater area, Tariva and Juanita Padilla reestablished a rancho on Cayo Costa, south of the military reservation lands. Gradually, some family members settled on the small, neighboring island of Punta Blanca and other area islands and coastal communities. Through marriages and births, the network of fishing kin connected to the Padilla clan grew, as the Darna, Almas, Toledo, Gomes, and other Latin-descended families joined with Anglo-descended families such as Woodring, Coleman, Bell, and Daniels.378

The lifestyles of these folk continued to be rooted in the environmental conditions of the region and commercial fishing remained their principal occupation. No longer, however, did the Padilla rancho and other long-term mullet-fishing operations in Charlotte Harbor, such as Gasparilla Island’s Peacon Brothers fishery, salt their harvests for shipment southward. Instead, along with the recent entrants to the fishery, the “old salts” took part in the new system of delivering their catch to the ice houses that were constructed throughout the region. Built along waterfront docks or on pilings over the


water, these depots received daily deliveries of three-hundred-pound blocks of ice from
the “run boats” operated by particular fish dealers. En route back to Punta Gorda, the fish
house vessels picked up the previous day’s iced-down harvests.\(^{379}\)

After centuries of producing salt-mullet marketed primarily to Cuba, the shipment
of iced mullet to northern consumers helped shift the character of southwest Florida from
a semi-Caribbean space—untamed and unhygienic—toward a more solidly American
milieu. Charlotte Harbor island residents still subsisted on feral pigs, gopher tortoise, and
mullet, but rather than obtaining olive oil, *aguadiente*, tobacco, and other supplies from
Cuba, these fishing folk increasingly became integrated into the cultural and consumer
networks of the U.S. South. In addition to ice, the fish dealers’ run boats delivered goods
that the islanders ordered from Punta Gorda merchants, who sold everything from “cigars
and tobaccos of all kinds,” to the “best and freshest canned goods,” “O’Donohue’s 5th
Avenue Coffee,” “native and Western beef,” and “good, durable shoes.” Esperanza
Woodring remembered the office manager of Punta Gorda Fish Company as a “good
guy” who fulfilled the Cayo Costa supply orders with care, a task that lead him to boast
about knowing the bra size of every fisherman’s wife from having processed their Sears
and Roebuck and Montgomery Ward deliveries. Born in 1918 in north Florida and reared
from age ten on Cayo Costa, Nellie Coleman, née Spearing, recalled how her family
survived the lean years of the Depression: “We was raised on swamp cabbage, gophers
[turtles] and cornbread. You could buy a lot of corn meal in those days for ten cents,
足够的 to last a family a long time.”\(^{380}\) As long-term staples for Indian, black, and white

\(^{379}\) “Fish Cabins of Charlotte Harbor,” National Register of Historic Places Multiple
Property Documentation Form, United States Department of the Interior, National Park
47.

\(^{380}\) The list of goods is drawn from advertisements published in the *Punta Gorda Herald*
on January 10, 1902 and July 30, 1908. Woodring interview by Edic, *Fisherfolk*, “a good
guy,” 55. The bra size anecdote, attributed to Harry Goulding, the Punta Gorda Fish
House office manager, is in Edic, *Fisherfolk*, 87. Nellie Coleman, interview by Robert
interview FF13, transcript, Samuel Proctor Oral History Program, Department of History,
University of Florida, Gainesville, “…swamp cabbage, gophers and cornbread,” 7.
Southerners, cornmeal and grits occupied a similar place in island diets as Latin mainstays such as rice and beans.

**Mullet, Self, and Place**

Throughout the region’s inshore fishing locales, and particularly within Cortez, the influx and growth of North Carolinian families contributed to a self-identification of these places and people as “native communities,” with their populations simultaneously white, Floridian, and Southern. As the species that Carolinian settlers followed southward to Florida, and as the primary fish harvested and eaten in Cortez and other fishing communities, mullet played a significant role in the construction and reinforcement of this identity. Ben Green, a descendant of Cortez settlers from Bogue Sound, North Carolina, wrote of his mother’s memories of mullet being on the table six nights a week except during the Depression, when the species took the place of Sunday’s chicken dinner. To keep things interesting, sometimes it was sautéed and smothered with onions and sometimes deep-fried, with lemon and ketchup alternating as condiments. In later decades, when Cortez families began holding reunions and “Native’s picnics,” smoked and fried mullet occupied central place as an icon of home. Along with swamp cabbage, mullet also was the cornerstone of Cedar Key’s Annual Native Families Reunion.  

Ubiquitous, nutritious, and cheap, if not free, mullet was a survival food for those who settled Florida’s Gulf Coast throughout the early twentieth century, as it had been for centuries before. In a 2002 interview, Pine Island fisherman Danny Holloway...

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381 In *Finest Kind*, Ben Green describes Cortez and similar Gulf Coast fishing villages as “native communities” of Floridians struggling against “Northern interests,” 11-13; mullet on his mother’s table every day, 33; family reunions and mullet, 34-35. The salience of mullet to the identity of Cortez’s Carolinian settlers as native Floridians also is drawn from Green’s presentation on January 18, 2006, “Endangered Species: Florida’s Fishing Villages” (The Florida Studies Program, University of South Florida, Saint Petersburg). For discussion of the annual “Native’s picnic” and other family gatherings in Cortez as vehicles for reinforcing community identity and kinship ties among the founding North Carolinian families, and the inclusion of frying and eating mullet in these celebrations, see Michael Jepson, “The Impact of Tourism on a Natural Resource Community: Cultural Resistance in Cortez, Florida” (PhD diss., University of Florida, 2004), 45, 148, 156-157. For mullet and swamp cabbage in the Annual Native Cedar Key Families Reunion, see Kevin M. McCarthy, *Cedar Key, Florida: A History* (Charleston: The History Press, 2007), 136.
explained that it was mullet that brought his family to the area. Traveling by ox and wagon to Pine Island from Parrish, a town some one hundred miles northward, Holloway’s great-grandfather and his sons would “go cast netting some mullet, smoke ‘em and ‘salt em…take ‘em back up to Parrish and they'd eat on mullet for a while…[and] he’d peddle some around.” Holloway’s grandfather liked the island—and the mullet—well enough that he moved there in the 1920s, and fishing became the family’s birthright: “My whole life has been here on the water…and my daddy's life, and everybody in my whole family's lives has been right here on this water,” Holloway proclaimed.  

For early twentieth century settlers in southwest Florida, mullet served as keystone species culturally as well as ecologically. A self-proclaimed Cracker, fisherman Rob Storter was born in 1894 in the town of Everglade, the grandson of a founding settler who migrated from Alabama. Establishing himself in Naples as a twenty-two-year-old newlywed, Storter built a pine-paneled, palm-thatched house on mangrove pilings dug into an oyster bar, a site where he could observe passing schools of mullet. Supplied with a boat and icebox from a Fort Myers wholesale fish company, he and his brother carried their harvests of mullet to a fish house in Marco for pick-up by the run boat. Although mackerel, kingfish, and pompano sold for higher prices per pound, mullet was his favorite species to catch and the most abundant.

The fish also was a teacher for Storter and his fellow fishermen, who tracked the species through sound at night; staked out and named hidden fishing holes; and learned to predict the movement of schools in relation to tide and weather. Through this immersive work, the fishermen of the region developed deep familiarity with the waterways and ecosystems of the Ten Thousand Islands, a coastline portrayed by one visitor as “a system of tortuous channels…more confusing than any maze.” Because of its centrality as a food, source of income, and guide to a unique environment, mullet served as a deathbed request for many in the region. Describing a bout of fever in 1917 that kept him bedridden and unable to eat for ten days and left his young wife dead, Storter recalled

that when he finally emerged from his near-death experience, the first food he requested was a piece of boiled mullet.\textsuperscript{383}

Mullet continued to function as an elemental survival food well into the twentieth century in more urbanized locales within southwest Florida as well as in rural areas. In about 1968, Robert and Helen Richards began operating the Seabreeze seafood market in Tampa as an adjunct to the restaurant of the same name, which Sicilian immigrant Vittorio Licata had opened in 1923 on the eastern shore of Hillsborough Bay. Both of them from low-income, white families in Tampa, Robert and Helen frequently ate mullet growing up and the plentiful fish was the primary species they sold in the market. Through the decades of her working life, Helen guessed she had probably cleaned enough mullet to fill her house up three times. In 2010, five years after the family closed the market, she remembered that “many times over the years,” older customers—white and black—would make a special order: “‘My daddy is dying and all he wants is a piece of mullet,’ ” a request that the Richards would fulfill without charge.\textsuperscript{384}

Starting out as a palmetto seafood shack, the Seabreeze restaurant evolved into a Tampa institution, serving a mix of cuisines drawn from several of the city’s dominant ethnicities: Italian, Cuban, Spanish, and Cracker. Once the Richards bought the restaurant from the Licata family in 1992, the casual front dining room tended to draw a “redneck” clientele from the rural areas surrounding the city, while the more formal back dining area catered to a wealthier crowd: “your doctors, lawyers, Indian chiefs, the royalty,” Helen remembered. Smoked mullet dip was well-liked in the front and back of the restaurant, but it was in the seafood market where the species was most popular. According to the Richards, “everybody” bought fresh mullet, black and white, rich and poor—although Cubans generally shopped in Ybor City and tended to prefer grouper. Selling for 25 cents per pound for decades beginning in the 1940s, mullet slowly

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\textsuperscript{384} Robert and Helen Richards, audio interview by the author, July 2, 2010, Palm River, Tampa, Florida.
\end{flushright}
increased in price from the late 1960s onward, reaching $1.50 a pound by the time the market closed in 2005. At those prices, people with little income sought out the fish because it was tasty and affordable, and politicians sought it out for the same reasons: at the fish fries accompanying “big political rallies…a hundred pounds of mullet would go a long ways…It was very cheap, a wonderful source of food, everybody loved it,” Helen recalled.\textsuperscript{385}

At seafood markets throughout Florida and the southeastern United States, African Americans were significant customers for mullet, but the species had wide appeal among blacks and whites. Robert Richards remembered that in the Seabreeze retail establishment, the “biggest clientele were blacks back then for mullet.” Born in 1928 into a white fishing family and raised on Punta Blanca Island, Corbett Levens recalled that when he was young, his father and other Charlotte Harbor fishermen sent barrels of salt-mullet to markets in Georgia, the Carolinas, and Alabama. In a 2002 interview, Levens described mullet as “a poor man’s fish…a working man’s fish…you know, you could feed your family with it,” adding that the species is “an excellent fish” to eat and “the colored people loved it…but white people eat it just as much.” In the Apalachicola area, where the dish of “salt fish and sweet potato” saw a great many people through the Depression, mullet was known as the “poor man’s pompano.” John McDonald, a white man who grew up in Cortez, recalled that in the early twentieth century, his father’s generation of fishermen salted mullet for shipment to fish stands and general stores in the Southeast. Throughout the twentieth century, McDonald reported, mullet was bought not just by blacks, but by the Southern population as a whole, with the wealthy enjoying it as much as poor people. Because of the broad, regional consumption of mullet, cutting

\textsuperscript{385} Quotes from Helen Richards are from Robert and Helen Richards, interview by the author. For additional background on the Seabreeze market and restaurant and the transition from the Licata family to the Richards family, see Robert S. and Helen C. Richards, \textit{The Seabreeze by the Bay Cookbook}, ed. Andrew Huse (Gibsonston, FL: American Printing USA, Inc., 2001). Helen Richards and Robert Richards, interview by Andrew Huse, March 27, 2006, Tampa Food Families Oral History Project, DOI T30-00010, transcript, Florida Studies Center Oral History Program, University of South Florida Libraries, Tampa.

An African American man who has owned the Oriental Fish Company in Tampa since 1992, Marvin Knight worked his way up from bagging fish and crabs and cleaning up at seafood markets owned by the Boromei and Mirabella fishing families. In 2010, he estimated that about 85 percent of his customers are African American, with mullet being a mainstay in the market. While black customers purchase and eat a lot of mullet, Knight suggested that affordability rather than “the race line” is the key factor in the popularity of the species. Mullet, he emphasized, remains a “real sought-out fish in the community,” in part because it still provides the basis for fish-fries organized to raise money for churches, high schools, colleges, and funerals. Although younger customers often opt for packaged fillets that are cheap and easy to prepare (species such as tilapia), people who grew up cooking and eating mullet at home continue to do so and eating fish on Friday remains an active custom for many, he observed. Tradition, combined with the firmness and protein content of the species, compels Knight to “eat a piece of mullet” at least once a week: “I’ll eat a piece of that quicker than any other…I’ve always eaten it and still will,” he noted.\footnote{Marvin R. Knight, audio interview by the author, July 10, 2010, Tampa, Florida.}

**Bridging Color and Connecting Class**

The marketing of mullet directly to low-income, rural people—which continued until the mid-twentieth century, at least—reinforced racially mixed circuits of production and consumption. Born in 1927, Tampa resident Grady “Bud” Albury grew up fishing with his maternal uncles and had fond memories of his mother, Annie Estelle Albury, née Linton, peddling fish out of a truck in the rural outskirts of the city in the 1950s. The daughter of a white man and a woman who was partly of Native American descent, Annie Estelle’s family was identified as white in state records but according to her son
she, along with her mother and several of her siblings, were dark-complexioned: “She was real dark-skinned. Daddy called her his little ginger cake,” Albury recalled. Many of her customers were black and all of them had little cash to spare, so the “Fish Lady” often traded mullet, bottom fish such as sheepshead and croaker, and crabs for farm products. Riding in a truck with coolers in the back, Albury remembered, his mother and a female friend or relative would ring a brass ship’s bell and call out, “‘Here comes the Fish Lady!’ And hey man, she brought [home] watermelon, cantaloupe, tomatoes, turnip greens, mustard greens.” Albury recounted one occasion when an older, black woman on Social Security could not pay for the three or four mullet she requested, so the “Fish Lady” gutted and scaled the fish while the farm woman cleaned a hen that had been running around in the yard, which meant that the Albury family would enjoy a chicken dinner as a treat.

Though iced fish in seafood markets was readily available in the mid-twentieth century, peddling fish in the Florida countryside was not uncommon through the 1950s and 1960s. Of African, Native American, and European descent, Mable Sims was born in 1946 and resides on land homesteaded by her great-grandfathers in 1889 in the rural Hernando County community of Twin Lakes, some twenty miles inland from the Gulf Coast fishing village of Bayport. When she was growing up on the family farm between the ages of five and seventeen, Sims recounted in a 2010 interview, a man named Mr. Baker “would come around and peddle mullet, sheepshead, and flounder” from his truck.

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388 Reminiscences about his mother’s “ginger cake” nickname and the “Fish Lady” story are from Grady “Bud” Albury, video interview by the author, June 6, 2006, Tampa, Florida. Genealogical references to the Albury and Linton lineages are from author interview, February 4, 2005 and notes from an unrecorded conversation between Albury and the author, October 29, 2004. In this conversation, Albury also commented: “Daddy used to tell mama, ‘You got a little black in you. I don’t got to worry about integrating, I’m already part way there,’ ” and, of himself and his brother, “Me and Jack was dark complected. I stay in the sun a lot, people think I’m from Jamaica. We got a little African-American in us.” For Linton family as “white,” see for example 1920 U.S. Federal Census, Florida, Pinellas County, Safety Harbor Town, Precinct No. 19, Enumeration District 47. For further details about the Albury family lineage (with roots in Eluthera, Bahamas, and Key West), see 1860 and 1870 U.S. Federal Census records from Monroe County, Florida. See also online genealogical work by Kimberly Albury: http://familytreemaker.genealogy.com/users/a/l/b/Kimberly-Albury/BOOK-0001/0006-0004.html and http://familytreemaker.genealogy.com/users/a/l/b/Kimberly-Albury/BOOK-0001/0006-0012.html.
to her family and others in the area, black and white. Because it was “the cheapest thing on the market,” mullet was especially popular. Smoked and fried preparations were her favorites, Sims recalled, reminiscing about a breakfast “treat…[of] fried mullet, hush puppies, baked beans, coleslaw. Now that was a traditional meal.” Mr. Baker, in Sims’ recollections, was a “white gentleman” and a “nice man,” who was welcome in their rural community.  

What Sims remembered with much less fondness were the large crockery containers full of salt-mullet, which exuded a smell she found “horrendous” but which her great-grandmother, Precious O’Neal, cherished. Some five decades after she last was subjected to the smell and taste, Sims related memories of cooking the salt-fish for her elder with fresh disgust:

I took it and rinsed it off first…[and] you didn’t have to salt it or anything anymore because the salt had done went through it…I cooked it and kind of sautéed it down with the onions and the bell pepper, the whole fish…Then my grandmother, she said, ‘Cook me a pot of grits.’ I cooked the grits and have it there in the kitchen for the breakfast…She would sit there and…suck the bones of that fish…and oh, it was just like a delight to her…And for me, ooh. I tasted it, but I didn’t like it.

In this story, Sims also emphasized the low cost of mullet: in her great-grandmother’s day, one dollar bought one hundred pounds of the fish. Traveling from the farm in a horse and buggy and, later, via a pick-up truck, Sims’ male relatives would drive the family matriarch to the coastal fish markets in Bayport, where they would purchase large quantities of fresh mullet to bring home. As a young girl, Sims and other family members helped clean the one hundred-pound sacks of fish, a task she also recalled with distaste. Dipping into a twenty-five-pound bag of salt, the older woman would fill the large crockery, alternating layers of mullet and salt: “Fish, salt, fish, salt, fish, salt, until she got to the top where she would put the salt over that again. Then she would put the lid on it.” Then she let it sit, and when the smell got just right, her great-grandmother knew it was ready to eat.

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389 Mable Sims, audio interview by the author, June 25, 2010, Twin Lakes, Hernando County, Florida.
390 Sims, interview by the author. Arno Surls Webster, a white woman, recounted similar memories from the 1940s of her family’s purchase of large quantities of mullet directly
Precious O’Neal’s passion for eating salt-mullet conveys connections to centuries-old food traditions, the multiracial social interactions within which they were embedded, and the cultural hybridity produced through Florida’s conflict-ridden history of settlement. As Mable Sims recounts, her great-great grandfather, Hampton St. Clair, was a light-skinned man who had been enslaved by members of the May family, who amassed one of the two largest land-holdings in Hernando County after having settled in Florida from Alabama. Born of an enslaved woman and a slave-owner, Hampton’s father, Antonio, eventually ran off to the Florida Seminoles. Following in his father’s footsteps, Hampton joined the Seminoles after an Indian raid on the May family’s plantation.

According to Sims, Hampton St. Clair became a “medicine man for the Seminole” and married a woman named Sally, who had long, “coal black” hair and who was “Native American…with the pointed nose and the high cheekbones and the color texture.” Born in 1871 as one of nine or ten children, their daughter, Precious, later was described by her dark-skinned great-granddaughter as a “high yellow” woman with blue eyes and “snow white pretty hair.” When Mable Sims would dutifully—if somewhat reluctantly—prepare salt mullet for her great-grandmother, she was taking part in a culinary tradition that had roots in every branch of the family’s ancestry: enslaved and self-emancipated African American, Native American, and Southern white.

from fishermen in a community about ten miles south of Bayport, with three generations of family members involved in cleaning and salting down the fish, saving the roe and gizzards for frying: “ahh, such tasty treats…!” “The Surls Family in Aripeka, Florida,” East Pasco Historical Society: http://eastpascohistoricalsociety.com/surlsfamilyinaripeka.html. John McDonald, from Cortez, also recalled his father’s continuation of the tradition of preparing and consuming salt-mullet for home use in the 1940s. Like Sims, McDonald emphasized the “pretty strong odor” that motivated his distaste for that traditional mode of preserving and consuming the species. Helen and Robert Richards likewise remembered the smell—and, therefore, the taste—of salt mullet with profound distaste.

For Mable Sims’ genealogy, see Mable Sims, “Ancestor Stories: St. Clair/May, VA>NC>AL>FL and Oneal, GA>FL,” posted on the Africana Heritage Project website: http://www.africanaheritage.com/_Ancestor_Story_.asp%3FAncestorID%3D13+&cd=2 &hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=us&client=firefox-a. See also records of the “StClare” (1880) “Oneil” (1900, 1930), “Oneal” (1910, 1940) and “O’Neill” (1920) families in U.S. Federal Census Records for Hernando County, Florida. Details of the settlement of the May family in Hernando County, Florida and their one-time ownership of St. Clair family members are found in Roger R. Landers, “The ‘Recent Unpleasantness’ in
The relative ease of racial relations that seems to be apparent in stories of selling, buying, and eating mullet assumes particular salience in light of Mable Sims’ ancestral experiences of the white supremacist violence that ravaged many parts of Florida in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. As the southern boundary of the state’s antebellum slave-based agricultural zone, Hernando County was a center for Confederate sentiment and a “hotbed for Klan activity” during and after the Reconstruction period. Lynchings and other violent attacks were common, with more than 40 county residents murdered between 1865 and 1879, most of them acts of racist brutality. During this period, Sims’ great-great uncle, the Reverend Arthur St. Clair (brother of Hampton) made the transition from being a slave of the prominent May family to becoming an influential leader in Brooksville, the county seat. In addition to being the founding minister of the Bethlehem Progressive Baptist Church and the co-founder of the county’s first school for black children, Reverend St. Clair served as Hernando County’s voter registrar, a county commissioner, the deputy sheriff, and was a captain of the Third Brigade in Florida’s militia.392

Within this historical and social setting, Arthur St. Clair’s prominence was treated as an affront by the white elite. On June 26, 1877, en route home from a political gathering and in the midst of his fourth run for a seat in the state House of Representatives, St. Clair and a companion were murdered by a gang of about twenty armed and mounted white men. A third companion, Mary Tanner, was able to escape and report the assassination. About one month before the murder, Reverend St. Clair—a light-skinned man who was listed as mulatto in the 1870 census, identified as black, and

could pass as white—had presided over the marriage of a black man, David James, and a white woman, Lizzie Day. St. Clair “didn’t see anything wrong with it, because he was white,” Mable Sims commented in a 2010 telling of the history of her great-great uncle. Contemporary opponents to Reconstruction felt otherwise: as an anonymous letter in Tampa’s *Sunland Tribune* newspaper put it, the Reverend’s sanctioning of the marriage represented an “unholy case of miscegenation.” St. Clair was killed less than three weeks after the publication of that letter.\footnote{Mary Tanner’s testimony, as relayed to a reporter for the *Key West Dispatch*, was printed in the *Sunland Tribune*, September 1, 1877, 2. See “Shooting Affray in Hernando,” *Sunland Tribune*, June 9, 1877, 2 for “unholy case of miscegenation.” For the marriage of James and Day and the white supremacist attacks on them, see also *Sunland Tribune* May 12, 1877. For Reverend St. Clair passing as white and having no objection to the marriage “because he was white,” Sims, interview by the author. See the 1870 U.S. Federal Census, Brooksville Post Office, Hernando County, Florida, for Arthur St. Clair’s state status as mulatto. His wife, Elizabeth, and all but two of their seven children likewise were listed as mulatto; the two youngest, two-year-old Nancy and three-month-old Elizabeth, were listed as black. For reports on St. Clair’s murder and events following (including the destruction by arson of the Hernando County courthouse, likely for the purpose of destroying records related to the case), see also “Political Murders in Florida,” *New York Times*, July 29, 1877, 7; and *Sunland Tribune* articles from July 8, 1877, July 21, 1877, August 25, 1877, October 6, 1877, October 13, 1877, and November 10, 1877 in the Hernando County Florida Genweb Project: http://flgenweb.org/harun/hernan/smp1.htm. In “The ‘Recent Unpleasantness,’ ” Roger Landers discusses the murder of Arthur St. Clair as one of many unimpeded acts of white supremacist violence that highlighted the “culture of lawlessness sanctioned by community officials” that persisted in Hernando County at least until the 1930s, 29. See also Roger Landers, “1877 Burning of Courthouse Symbolizes Period of Lawlessness,” *St. Petersburg Times*, June 25, 2007: http://www.sptimes.com/2007/06/25/Hernando/1877_burning_of_court.shtml.}

Intimate experience with brutal expressions of white supremacist ideology etched itself in the collective memories of the extended St. Clair family and in their personal itineraries through the regional landscape. The assassination of Arthur St. Clair was not the family’s only experience of racist violence. In 1929, Sims’ cousin Carl Lang (a grandson of Precious St. Clair O’Neal) was attacked while walking home and lynched: “They put him on a horse, put the noose around his neck, popped his neck, dropped him on the ground…and burnt him up. They had a moonshine party,” Sims reported. One response to such atrocities by Sims’ relatives and other successful African Americans in Hernando County was to establish large homesteads within which networks of kin and
reliable neighbors could be fairly self-sufficient. Another response was the creation of itineraries of safety and avoidance. According to Sims, her grandmother avoided traveling to the county seat except when she had to pay her taxes: “The only time [my grandmother] went to Brooksville was once a year...She wouldn’t go there...because it was so much lynching and killing of our black brothers, fathers, uncles.” In contrast, Dade City, the seat of Pasco County, located about twenty-five miles south of Brooksville, was considered an acceptable place to venture regularly in order to market the produce of the family farm.  

Within the climate of racist lawlessness, the process of procuring mullet occupied relatively safe spatial and social circuits for this African American family in Hernando County. During the early decades of the twentieth century, as the extent of white supremacist mob-violence decreased throughout the South—replaced in part by the heightened severity of Jim Crow legislation—Florida’s rate of lynchings remained high, second only to Mississippi in the 1930s. Within the state, Hernando County was a particularly perilous place for African Americans, with a per capita rate of lynchings between 1900 and 1930 that was nearly ten times greater than the state average. Nevertheless, Precious O’Neal and other family members willingly traversed the twenty-some miles from their home to the Hernando County fishing community of Bayport. As Sims noted, her great-grandmother, in the company of male relatives, was treated respectfully by the predominantly white fishermen from whom they purchased mullet: “Now when they seen my grandmother, my grandmother was a very gracious lady, and they tipped their hats or they helped my grandmother.” The mundane practice of purchasing and salting fish for home consumption posed no threat to the institutions of white dominance in Florida. At the same time, the reality that mullet production was considered an acceptable social domain demonstrates that in certain locales and time

periods the species and the people who harvested it played a role in helping people of color to maneuver and sustain themselves within a violent cultural landscape.\(^{396}\)

For some Anglo-American participants in the state’s inshore fisheries, close interactions with black and Latin kin, neighbors, and customers also mitigated against the “new doctrine of race hatred” promoted by the white economic and political elite in the postbellum South. Alternately identifying himself as a Southerner, a “Cracker SB,” and a “Bohemian Key West Conch,” Bud Albury affectionately described his hometown of Tampa as “a Latin city…And hell, there’d be Spanish, Cuban, Mexican, and whatever, so really it was an old mullet-fishing bunch of old Crackers and Wops.” The business of commercial fishing, Albury maintained, taught him to “live with all nationalities of people,” including Cubans and Puerto Ricans, as well as “Yankees, Crackers, and hippies and black people.” Because fish markets in the Tampa area generally were located “in the ghetto” and because both white and black people shopped and lived there, racial interaction was routine, according to Albury. In his terms, the “ghetto” was defined by class more than race: “The ghetto can be any color, to me. It’s the poor, the poor that’s living from hand to mouth.” Passing from fishermen’s hands to the mouths of the people, mullet was a common denominator for feeding people and, in many sections of the state, for fostering a climate of relative tolerance.\(^{397}\)

**Mullet as Bread and Butter**

As the fish of the common people of Florida, mullet helped blur racial boundaries partly because it functioned as a survival mechanism for poor and working-class people

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\(^{396}\) Sims, interview by the author. In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendell (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), Michel de Certeau argues that popular ways of using the products and systems created by the dominant social order can constitute a form of resistance. By creating “a certain play in that order,” subjugated peoples expand the “space for maneuvers of unequal forces and for utopian points of reference,” 18.

in terms of production as well as consumption. As described earlier, Danny Holloway’s family established itself on Lee County’s Pine Island largely because of the abundance of mullet. Another white fisherman in the region, Corbett Levens, described a similar trajectory. Orphaned at a young age, Levens’ father moved from Mulberry, Florida in order to find work and soon discovered that the Charlotte Harbor region was full of “little settlements of fishermen...[with] five or six families living fairly closely together” in tight-knit communities. Paid in shares, fishing crews worked in order to support their households in a basic lifestyle: “roof, food, and clothes; that was it,” Levens explained.

The close connection that existed between families and fish houses in fishing communities throughout the Gulf Coast in the early twentieth century meant that labor essentially was exchanged for goods. Detailing a system generally recalled with nostalgic fondness rather than recrimination by many Florida fishing folk, Levens remembered that “when you fished it went in on the asset side of the ledger, and when you got something it went on the debit side. You’d balance the books every once in a while, but very little money ever changed hands.” Settling into the net-fishing lifestyle, Levens’ parents raised their children within the “working family” model common to many inshore fishing communities in Florida and elsewhere, wherein everyone—young and adult, male and female—pitched in to help with household and occupational tasks. Echoing the memories of most of his fellow fishermen, Levens’ earliest recollections of tagging along on fishing trips date from when he was four or five years old.398

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398 Levens audio interview by the author. For additional descriptions of early childhood initiation into fishing practices, see Holloway and Albury audio interviews by the author. Randolph “Tiny” Darna, audio interview by the author, July 14, 2002, Bokeelia, Florida. As Holloway stated: “…they’d throw me under the bow cap whenever I was a little bitty baby. Six, seven months old. I fished ever since before I could walk. I fished all my life in Florida.” See also Linda Lampl, “Feeding the People from Generation to Generation: An Ethnography of the Fishermen of Pine Island” (MA thesis, Florida State University, 1987), 209. The Fisherfolk Oral History Collection, Samuel Proctor Oral History Program, Department of History, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL. Edic, Fisherfolk. Green, Finest Kind. Jepson, “The Impact of Tourism.” Small-scale, inshore fisheries in Florida and elsewhere in the United States have possessed a childcare function at sea as well as in onshore occupational sites, as toddlers and young children (mostly boys but some girls) frequently accompany their elder relations (mostly men but some women) onboard vessels in certain conditions. Susan Eacker suggests that in Cortez and in other inshore fisheries, women are not excluded from commercial harvesting practices. The
Mullet was at the heart this milieu, tying people both to the inshore marine environment and to the cultural and economic networks within which the species circulated. Though it was the lowest-earning fish—garnering fishermen one cent per pound in the 1930s and moving up to four cents a pound during World War II—mullet was abundant and capable of being harvested in the cotton gill nets then in use, unlike stronger-fighting species such as redfish and sea trout. Describing mullet as his favorite fish to eat and as the dominant species, by far, that he and other fishermen targeted, Charlotte Harbor fisherman Alfonso Darna (grandson of Tariva and Juanita Padilla) succinctly stated the ubiquity of the fish: “Mullet is all you need.” Within this context, Levens described mullet as “the bread and butter” of southwest Florida’s fishing industry and the families enmeshed in that environmental and economic world. In popular media and in casual conversation, the use of this metaphor to describe the economic and cultural importance of the “humble mullet” in Florida has been common. Exchanged with fish houses for staples, with farmers for produce, and, on occasion, with landlords for rent, mullet put food on the table by virtue of its flesh and by serving as a living legal tender.  

few who fish professionally, however, eventually “become engendered as masculine. Little girls, as ‘tom boys,’ can go with their fathers up to a certain age—until they become women. Then, if they still fish, they become, in effect, sons,” Eacker, “Mullet, Mangoes, and Midwives,” 160.  

Levens, interview by the author. Lampl, “Feeding the People,” 210. See also, for example, Julianne Munn, “New Rules Might Crop Fish Harvest,” Ocala Star-Banner, July 8, 1991, 1B, 4B: “It’s not the prettiest fish in the sea and it’s not the crème de la crème on restaurant menus. But along Florida’s Gulf Coast the humble mullet is bread and butter to commercial fishermen.” See also “Fishing Limits on Mullet Approved,” The News-Journal [Daytona Beach], September 27, 1989, 17A: “A plan to reduce the fishing of mullet, the ‘bread and butter’ species for fishermen in the Gulf of Mexico, was unanimously approved Tuesday by Gov. Bob Martinez and the Cabinet.” Referring to the Chesapeake Bay region, David Shores in Tangier Island: Place, People, and Talk (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2001) used the metaphor to suggest the long-term preservation qualities of mullet: “The mullet is a common fish but appears only now and then in the Bay. Years ago, it was the bread-and-butter fish along the coast because it could be smoked,” 215. Alfonso Darna’s “mullet is all you need” statement is in an interview by Bob Edic, February 24, 1990, Florida Fisherfolk Oral History Collection interview FF4, transcript, Samuel Proctor Oral History Program, Department of History, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL, 8. For mullet as payment for rent, see Grady “Bud” Albury, audio interview by the author, August 20, 2004, Tampa, Florida.
By describing mullet as “bread and butter,” Levens and others employed a common Western trope. One aspect of this metaphor is the association of bread with currency: for example, money as “dough” and the term “breadwinner” referring to procurement of household income. Parallel to the place of rice in many Asian cultures, bread has functioned as the primary staple food in parts of Europe and the United States and thus also serves as a symbolic stand-in for food itself and, by extension, as a metaphor for collective selfhood. As a Christian metaphor, the meaning of “our daily bread” as an element of the Lord’s Prayer alludes to the basic elements of life necessary to continue the “shared human condition.” Bread in this sense represents that which is humble, essential, and communal.400

Such connotations are evident in the depth of attachment Florida inshore fishermen expressed toward producing mullet as an element of collective sustenance. As a deacon and elder in the First Baptist Church of Pine Island, Levens framed the relationship between commercial fishermen and mullet as an element of Christian stewardship: “I firmly believe that God put everything here to sustain man…I don’t know that we’ve been good stewards over the resource, but He never intended ‘em to be taken away and not used as a food resource.” Such sentiments were echoed in a 2002 interview with fellow Pine Island fisherman Owen Stewart, who described the late-twentieth century political ascendance of sport-fishing and the predominant cultural attachment to “the pleasure of catch and release” in terms of Christian eschatology: “God’s word says that men would be seekers of their pleasures and in these end times we see that in so many things. They are trying to take the fish of the sea from the people who catch and

According to Albury, in the 1950s real estate developer Tony Lubrano rented the “Doggy Wog Dog Food Factory,” along with a forty by eighty-foot G.I. barracks, to Albury and his wife in exchange for fifty pounds of mullet a week, which Lubrano likely had smoked to serve in his restaurant. During this period, Lubrano owned and operated the China Clipper restaurant and lounge on the Tampa side of the Courtney Campbell Causeway. See “On Business Row,” St. Petersburg Times, January 9, 1949, 54.

feed the public. God intended this for the nourishment of our bodies.” As the Christian Lord’s Prayer requests divine assistance in supplying the material fundamentals needed to sustain a community of people rather than the individual—the supplicant does not pray for “my daily bread”—so Stewart and other fishermen situated themselves as members of a commonweal, perceiving mullet as essential sustenance for themselves and a broader public.401

Stewart’s commitment to harvesting mullet commercially stemmed not only from his estimation of the species as nutritious and good-tasting, but also because the fish provided such qualities to “people of not astounding incomes,” as he put it. According to Stewart and a host of other mullet fishermen in Florida, the work of fulfilling the market demands of low-income people who did not have the physical or financial means to fish for themselves was a moral and civic responsibility. As Pine Island fisherman Steve Levy stated, “We’re reaching beyond just the people that own boats. We’re reaching inland.” Like people who fish recreationally, Levy—along with members of Florida’s inshore commercial fishing community in general—expressed enjoyment over the aesthetic and physical dimensions of the activity: “It was something that I just loved—being out there on the boat. You’re with nature, and it surrounds you. And you become entwined in it and it kind of grows on you,” he commented. For Levy and others, however, such pleasures were augmented by the pride generated through connecting low-income consumers with a healthy, public resource.402 Over the course of the twentieth century, mullet was the foundation for a relationship between inshore commercial fishing people, the nearshore waters, and the common folk who peopled the state. Within that relationship, the providential benefits proffered by the species consisted of a basic livelihood, nutrition, and a sense of well-being from knowing that, whatever else might fail, mullet would almost surely be available.

Seizing Destiny, Creating a Destination

Because the sea meant many things to people who lived in or visited Florida during the early twentieth century, the notion that the state’s abundant marine resources and coastal environs were gifts from providence had broad purchase in the state. As the production details of the film Hell Harbor along the shoreline of Old Tampa Bay illustrate, within this period the lines between Florida’s coastal environment as a tropical fantasy, a recreational mecca, and a bountiful source of food and income were not sharply drawn. Providing an arena onto which dreams about the past and plans for the future could be projected, the seascapes of the state could and did afford a range of human uses, including commercial fishing, sport fishing, recreational boating, and transportation of people and goods. As the century progressed, however, conflicts between occupational and entertainment usages of the sea grew stronger, in part because the substance of what “providence” meant to various actors differed widely.

Contrasting with the understanding of mullet as the community’s daily bread was the continued interest in prospecting Florida’s waters for economic or social advancement. As described in previous chapters, these prospects took two central forms: commercial harvesting of lucrative species that would appeal to northern consumers and generate wealth, and the development of the coastal realm into a place to escape the demands of the workaday world through sport and relaxation. Certainly the exchange of mullet for goods or income was a commercial transaction, which generated revenue for the wholesale dealers and, to a lesser extent, for the fishermen, but the consistently low cost of the species limited the profitability of this enterprise. In addition, the catadromous habits of the fish (spawning offshore but otherwise living in estuarine, brackish, or fresh inshore waters) mean that most of its life cycle is spent in accessible habitats, which allowed for similar sets of relatively simple gear to be used to harvest the species for centuries: small boats; cast, seine, or gill nets; and immersive, physically demanding labor, often family-based. Thus, unlike a species such as red snapper, harvesting mullet provided neither great wealth, a path toward professionalization of the industry and increasing sophistication of its technologies, nor a shift of fishing communities towards middle-class propriety. Florida’s seascapes, state officials and business leaders recognized, possessed great potential to generate wealth and thereby advance the
economic and social status of the state. As the U.S. Fish Commission had before them, however, Florida’s twentieth century political and economic elite looked to resources other than mullet to realize this potential.

During the first several decades of the twentieth century, opportunities for converting Florida’s coastal zone into a more fiscally productive domain frequently were represented as a matter of seizing upon the state’s providentially ordained destiny. Echoing the broad ideological notion of manifest destiny—that the divine mission of the United States was to provide a civilized model for the “historically retrograde” peoples of the world—civic and business leaders predicted that capitalization of the seascapes would propel the state towards toward a glorious future. In 1925, the promotional magazine *Suniland*, for example, printed a poem by Roylston Markham titled “God Made Florida for America,” which was set within an Art Deco-styled illustration by Clark DeBall. This line drawing depicted a white woman standing on a shoreline, facing a palm-lined island, and dwarfed by a magnificent rising or setting sun, its rays fanning out from behind a beatific cloud burst. Americans, the poem averred, are God’s children but, having been immersed in exhausting labor, chaotic markets, and political strife, they had forgotten “they knew how to play!” Florida was the “happy paradise” of the nation, at first neglected by its founders, but ripe for rediscovery as a “dwelling in the sunshine” created for Americans by God for “the rebirth of their soul” through comfort and relaxation.

The rhetorical effect of this verse and image was to bring Florida into the rubric of American exceptionalism by inserting a vacation clause into the spirit of capitalism: the purpose of the peninsular state, Markham and many others asserted, was to remind God’s chosen people how—and where—to unwind. Four years after this publication, *Hell Harbor* made use of the state’s cultural hybridity and Caribbean-leaning economic circuits to construct a fictional, picaresque locale geographically and temporally distant from the United States. *Suniland’s* “God Made Florida for America” and similar promotional texts, however, parlayed Florida’s physical and biological environment—extensive shorelines, flora and fauna considered exotic to Northerners, and plenty of

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sunshine and warm weather—into the construction of a real-life paradise at home. Such approaches to framing the state’s fundamental role in twentieth century American life were typical of the time period.
Responsible for developing new natural resource-based industries and revenue streams in the post-slavery economy at its 1868 inception, Florida’s Bureau of Immigration (a division of the Department of Agriculture) increasingly directed its energies toward promoting tourism. In an appeal to the nation’s budding middle class, a 1932 pamphlet circulated by the Bureau extolled Florida not so much as a site for permanent settlement—though this was not discouraged—but rather as an ideal vacation destination: the perfect escape from work, accessible to anyone with a car. Announcing on the inside cover that authentic facts for tourists were contained within, the pamphlet consisted of a travelogue of the state, titled “Florida’s Advantages for Motoring,” with the byline of Nathan Mayo, Commissioner of Agriculture: “Winter really is coming. Are you thinking about going away? Consider driving to Florida,” the text began. As a “borderland between Anglo-Saxon America and Latin America,” the state’s semi-tropical environment amounted to “an emerald kingdom,” which one had to visit to appreciate. Photographs interspersed throughout the text depicted Florida shorelines lined with hundreds of cars as well as images of white vacationers—men and women—clad in bathing suits and frolicking on palm-lined beaches, posing beside trophy tarpon and grouper, and playing golf or tennis.\footnote{Nathan Mayo, \textit{Florida’s Advantages for Motoring}, Department of Agriculture, Bureau of Immigration, Tallahassee, Florida (St. Augustine: The Record Company, 1932), 1, 5, 9. Source: NMAH Archives, Warshaw Collection, Box 2, General—Geographic Area: Florida, Folder 2: Development.}

Tourist promotional materials of the 1920s and 1930s directed much of their rhetorical energies toward creating an appealing image of the state within the national imagination to counter associations of the state with frontier primitivism and tropical dangers. Within a report from Florida’s Department of Agriculture, for example, a section titled “Advertising Minus” expressed anxiety over the “false impression”—based on oft-repeated postcard caricatures of African American children chased by alligators—that the state was “largely a land of alligators, swamps and negro babies.”\footnote{Richard H. Edmonds, “The Glowing Destiny of Florida,” in \textit{Florida’s Resources and Inducements, Eighteenth Biennial Report}, Florida Department of Agriculture, Part 1—1923-24 (Tallahassee: T.J. Appleyard), “alligators, swamps and negro babies,” 27. For discussion of the portrayal in U.S. popular culture of black children as “nameless, shiftless natural buffoons running from alligators and toward fried chicken,” see David}
Bureau of Immigration pamphlet supplanted such negative advertisement, in part, with idealized motifs of white womanhood. Modeled after John Gast’s 1872 painting, “American Progress,” the back cover image portrayed the allegorical figure of America as a white woman, clad in a diaphanous white gown, crowned with electric sparks, floating southward along the peninsula, with the sun setting behind a West Coast horizon in the distance. Rather than the book and telegraph wire carried by Gast’s “America,” this figure holds what appears to be a radio microphone in her right hand. The radiating crown of sparks closely resembles the logo of the newly formed National Broadcasting Company (NBC), which emerged during this period as a medium for “creating and defining a national public” within a polyglot country comprised of “disparate


Figure 12. Female Figure of America in Florida, from Nathan Mayo, *Florida’s Advantages for Motoring*, back cover. Archive Center of the National Museum of American History, Warshaw Collection of Business Americana.

“...” scattered across a vast geographic area. Such iconography replicated the message within Gast’s painting that advanced forms of mass communication were tools for national unification. This idea would have resonated with the Bureau of Immigration’s persistent attempts to use contemporary advertisement techniques to

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406 Michele Hilmes, “NBC and the Network Idea: Defining the ‘American System,’ ” in *NBC: America’s Network*, ed. Michele Hilmes (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 7. Appreciation goes to Wendy Adams, Eric Applegarth, Lois Horton, and Mari Yoshihara, who contributed suggestions for interpreting this image, particularly regarding the object held by the female figure. Alternate suggestions to the radio microphone idea include a car wheel cover, an electric turbine, or a cross-section of a grapefruit.
establish the idea of Florida as a welcoming, domestic travel destination in the minds of
the growing body of white, middle-class Americans.

An emblem of modernity, the pamphlet’s figure of America in Florida ushers the
wild, rural history of the state out of the frame, while heralding the future in her wake.
Toward the right of the illustration, chronologically ascending from bottom to top, are the
civilizing figures of white pioneers aiming a rifle at a black bear, a farmer beside a log
cabin plowing his fields, a galloping team of horses drawing a stagecoach, and a
thoroughfare traveled by bicycles, a tractor, automobiles, and a train. Across the horizon,
illuminated by the setting sun, lies a coastal strip of land lined with glittering buildings.
Along the left edge of the image, moving towards the past, are a black bear in the woods,
a small family of Indians traveling on horseback, an ox-team drawing a Conestoga
wagon, and a pine forest. Topping the illustration, a dirigible and two airplanes fly
southward in the pastel, cloud-streaked sky. Rather than civilizing the wilderness through
logic and civic order, as conveyed in Gast’s painting, the female America in this
illustration domesticates Florida through increasing ease of travel and lifestyle:
electricity, entertainment, and motorized travel. The future belongs to the comfortable,
the image suggests.407

Although these promotional materials emphasized the playful and rejuvenating
capacities of Florida’s seascapes, fundamental to such discourse was the vision of the sea
and its fruits as sources of revenue. As the state’s Marketing Commissioner suggested in
the 1923 Department of Agriculture report, Florida’s function as the “Playground of the
Nation” was as much an element of its productive resources as agriculture, commercial
fishing, timbering, and phosphate mining, inasmuch as the approximately five hundred
thousand tourists who visited annually spent between fifty million and one hundred

407 My analysis of this image is indebted to Carolyn Merchant’s interpretation of John
Gast’s “American Progress” and other late nineteenth century paintings that convey an
“ascensionist narrative” in praise of the patriarchal, white supremacist project of moving
the unruly continent toward its “final platonic, civilized, ideal form.” See “From Nature
to Civilization” in Reinventing Eden: The Fate of Nature in Western Culture (New York:
Routledge, 2004), 127, 129.
million dollars in the state.\textsuperscript{408} Sportfishing, swimming and boating, and other recreational or aesthetic engagements with coastal and marine environments, in other words, were not oppositional to the workaday realm of income production within and for the state, but rather engines for it.

\textbf{To Eat or To Play}

Twentieth century demographic upheavals generated physical alterations of the state’s shorelines and social alterations of the relationships between Florida’s people and seascapes. By the end of the century, coastal counties became home to 75 percent of the population, also accounting for the majority of the development of the built environment. The search for the “good life” in post-war Florida and within the United States as a whole included not only the pursuit of consumer goods but also “environmental quality,” collectively defined in terms of “aesthetic and amenity” valuations, in contrast to utilitarian, productive uses of natural resources and domains.\textsuperscript{409} As was the case throughout the country, increased recreational engagement with the state’s waterways was accompanied by developing opposition to the occupational uses of such spaces, along with sensibilities that equated commercial production of seafood with environmental degradation.\textsuperscript{410}


\textsuperscript{409} Florida Coastal Management Program, “Florida Assessment of Coast Trends 2010 (FACT 2010),” Florida Department of Environmental Protection (Tallahassee: 2010).

Throughout the twentieth century, many of the state’s mullet-fishing families objected to the construction of the seascape as a site of leisure and the attitudes that accompanied this shift. According to “Tiny” Darna, for example, sport-fishing organizations in the 1990s were determined to get commercial fishermen “off the water” primarily because they “wanted the fish to play with.” Steve Levy concurred, stating that tourists and wealthy coastal residents in the state tend to “look at the water like their playground. It’s like a kid looks at a sandbox or a swing set.” Recalling stories told to him as a child by older fishermen, Levy suggested that conflicts between commercial net fishermen and sport-fishing visitors dated to the early development of the tourist industry in the Charlotte Harbor area. Born in 1899, Arthur Coleman lived on Cayo Costa Island and net-fished for mullet and other species along with his wife, Nellie. In the 1920s, at times when fishing was poor, he also served as a guide for tarpon-fishing tourists on Useppa Island. Levy recounted Coleman’s recollections of confrontations between net-fishing islanders and members of the “rich ruling class that had money that came down here, and they wanted to run the show.” On several occasions, according to Levy, Coleman announced to the sport-fishing clients, “‘You ain't going to fish in my boat any more,’ because of their attitudes towards him and his ways of life.” Commercial net-fishing and the “barefoot” lifestyle that accompanied the occupation were factors that “rubbed…against the grain” of wealthy visitors to the coast. Such tensions persisted throughout the century, Levy maintained, worsening as the coastal environs of the state became increasingly developed for residential and recreational uses.411

For Levy and others, a recreational conceptualization of inshore waters disrupted the notion of the commonweal that united fishermen and low-income fish consumers through the body of mullet as a food. “Fish were put here for us to eat, okay? Nowhere in the scriptures does it say that they’re put here to play with. No place,” Levy insisted. Robert Richards likewise was emphatic about the need to maintain the fundamental status

of mullet as food: “It’s terrible that [mullet] is not canned for human consumption…That just aggravates me so bad…I think a menhaden minnow or a smaller species of fish should be used for…bait and a mullet be used for human consumption.” Fishing folks’ emotional affirmation of mullet as a source of human sustenance and themselves as purveyors of it reflected an ongoing understanding that basic needs rather than entertainment were fundamental to public wellbeing.

The stories that southwest Florida’s twentieth century commercial fishing people have told about harvesting, processing, selling, and eating mullet paint a picture of the inshore waters and coastal environment of the region that is morally and ecologically sensible to them. While the construction of the state’s coastal environs as an exotic tourist domain for the nation helped cast the hybrid world of mullet producers and consumers as elements of a mythological, pirate-infused past, within their own narratives fishing families placed themselves as a worthy members of a vital and coherent cultural world. In a 2002 interview, for example, a Pine Island husband and wife fishery team, Steve and Mel Long, discussed the essential attributes of southwest Florida’s inshore commercial fishing folk, which Mel described as an “ethnicity” or a “subculture” or “tribe”: “These guys, they love being out here, they love to bring the product back, they’re proud of what they catch, and they’re proud to be feeding people.” Her husband agreed, simply stating, “People have to eat. And we produce food…I like feeding people, and I like cooking for people.” As historian James McWilliams has noted, the sense that civic worth and dignity can be derived from the physically demanding occupation of independent food production is a republican virtue as old as the nation itself. The specific nature of the Longs’ interactions with mullet and the other marine organisms they harvested and processed—that these were not only for household consumption but were made available to a broader, non-fishing public as “products”—was an essential component of how they and other inshore commercial fishing people defined a meaningful sense of themselves, the community in which they lived, and the geography of the region.

412 Levy, interview by the author. Richards, interview by the author.
Like many other inshore commercial fishermen, Steve Long’s understanding of his identity as a food producer was tied to his internal connection to the marine environment. Describing his fascination with the critical function of mangroves as habitat below and above the waterline, he noted, for example, “There’s just something special about water…It’s not the fish so much as me being on the water…Here on the water you kind of have to learn how to adapt.” As has been observed for small-scale farmers and fishermen in the nineteenth century, the perception on the part of the Longs and other Florida fishing families that they were an important link between the marine environment and hungry people led to a moral “allegiance” to particular natural systems shaped by and for human needs. Part of the adaptation mentioned by Long involves iterative practices common to fishermen in general: for example, seasonal or geographic experiments with gear placement and long-term remembrance of the effects of water temperature and climatic events on fish behavior. Fusing consciousness with technology, these place-specific actions tended to generate an understanding among many within southwest Florida’s mullet-fishing community that they were vital components of the dynamic ecosystems within which they labored.414

Such notions of communal “rootedness…and belonging” to a cultivated, food-producing marine environment were at odds ideologically and pragmatically with the construction of a leisure-oriented seascape and the physical and chemical alterations of marine ecosystems upon which it depended. By the final decade of the twentieth century the question of which function of Florida’s waters—to eat or to play—best served the...
public good would be put to a vote. As explored in the concluding chapter, the results of
this vote demonstrated that the commonweal between mullet, people, and the seascape
finally had been fractured.\footnote{Denis Cosgrove suggests that it is in “the cultivated earth…that perhaps the most
deeply rooted myths are to be discovered. Indeed, the most powerful of them concern
rootedness, ideas of home and belonging, or locality and identity, and of the social and
environmental dangers of change and modernization.” The same can be said for the
“cultivated waters” of inshore fishing grounds. Cosgrove, Social Formation and Symbolic
Landscape (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998), xxx.}
CHAPTER 5
FROM TABLE TO TRASH: DEFINING THE PEOPLE’S BENEFIT

Introduction

In 1920, Florida’s outgoing Shell Fish Commissioner, Josiah Asakiah Williams, addressed the growing political and cultural divide in the state between fishing for pleasure and net-fishing for the commercial production of food. Speaking to the American Fisheries Society, he posed the conflict as an economic standoff between the tourism industry and seafood wholesalers, with net fishermen—who predominantly targeted mullet—caught in the middle:

There are indications of a coming conflict in Florida between those interested in sport fishing and those engaged in commercial fishing. The sport fishermen are backed in their demands for waters in which commercial fishing shall be prohibited by our coast cities and towns, which receive many tourists during the winter season; while the commercial fishermen are backed by the fish dealers of the state. There are fish in abundance for both and the solution to this problem must soon be had, for it would be a great detriment to commercial fishing industries if large sections of the state were unnecessarily closed to net fishermen.

Writing in the midst of Florida’s early twentieth century spike in real estate speculation, Williams foresaw that a surge in development and population would generate conflicts over public use of marine space. The media campaigns that fueled the “land boom” promoted Florida as a paradise and a cornucopian source of “easy money on the last frontier,” seizing on the peninsula’s quasi-tropical climate as a revenue-generating natural resource. Protecting this asset required managing the quality of its sensual appeal. As Williams’ comments suggest, the attractiveness of the shoreline as a scene of lushness and site of leisure increasingly became antithetical to the look, smell, and sound of producing seafood for the market.416

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Within the economic conflicts between commercial and sport fishing lay ideological divisions over the seascape as a social space. Articulating a democratic vision for managing access to Florida’s seascapes, one in which all potential users of this public domain could be equally at home, Williams promoted the social benefits generated by fishing, both recreational and for the market. Access to unhindered waterways for sport fishing contributed to the common good, as the activity enhanced “clean living and good health,” he maintained. At the same time, Williams supported both the regulation and expansion of commercial fishing, strongly endorsing, for example, a closure on mullet-fishing during spawning season to prevent depletion of the stocks, while also encouraging increased commercial fishing in certain areas and the development of new markets for the state’s seafood in general.

For Williams, the commonweal that united fishermen, consumers, and the state’s waterways occupied a valuable place in the growth of the state. Commercial fishing for mullet produced a healthy, good-flavored, easy-to-prepare food fish that was accessible to every consumer, “be he ever so poor,” he wrote. Describing the generous hospitality, industriousness, and frugality of a typical mullet fisherman in the state (despite occasional bouts of drunken pugnacity), the Commissioner queried, “Who, being a man who must earn his bread by the sweat of his brow, would not prefer to be a Florida commercial fisherman?” According to Williams, commercial fishing stimulated the same rejuvenating qualities that recreational fishing was said to produce: relief from the noise, chaos, and pollution of cities and factories; immersion in the natural world; and independence from routine. 417

Williams’ temperate views notwithstanding, tensions between recreational engagements with the sea and the cultural connections to waterways as sources of basic

provisions and livelihoods were embedded within the organization he briefly headed. Designed to manage public access to the fruits of Florida’s waterways, the Shell Fish Commission was established as a branch of the state’s Department of Agriculture. At its 1913 formation, the Commission was responsible only for regulating Florida’s shell fish industry, primarily oysters and clams, but within two years the state’s general saltwater fisheries were included within its purview.418 From the outset, the duties of the institution contained ambiguities. Charged with enforcing conservation laws “for the benefit of the people,” the institution was responsible for protecting and enhancing the state’s marine resources, while encouraging Florida’s populace and visitors to “enjoy more fully the fruits” of the fisheries.419 Given the multiple ways individuals and groups interacted with the sea, conflicting interpretations of what “enjoyment” and “the benefit of the people” might mean were certain to arise as the century progressed.

As decades of promotional work succeeded and the idea of Florida as the Sunshine State of the nation took hold, prospects dimmed for maintaining the state’s waterways as a shared space. Mid-century demographic trends augured enormous change in Florida’s cultural and physical geography. Dubbed the Big Bang, post-World War II explosions in population and the built environment transformed Florida from the most rural of the Southern states into an “urban megastate” characterized by sprawling suburbs, a car-dependent culture, and a powerful tourist industry. Fulfilling nineteenth century aspirations, the bulk of the population growth came from the migration of white people from Northern states.420

In addition to the influx of new residents to the state, the ability of middle-class visitors to drive or fly to Florida contributed to the development of an economically

419 Shell Fish Division, Florida State Department of Agriculture, Second Biennial Report For the Years 1915 and 1916 (Tallahassee: T.J. Appleyard, n.d.), 13.
significant year-round tourist industry, rather than a winter season oriented primarily toward the elite. As Florida’s Board of Conservation noted in 1952, tourists from Northern states such as Ohio, Tennessee, and Illinois increasingly flocked to the Sunshine State for a weekend of “piscatorial excitement,” returning home “refreshed and tanned.” The conversion of the state into the Playground of the Nation that officials eagerly anticipated earlier in the century became big business by the end of the twentieth century and the dawn of the twenty-first.

As the recreational importance of the seascape grew, the status of mullet diminished. A quintessentially local fish, trailing its long history as a food for low-income and Southern consumers, Florida mullet held little significance for many new residents or those who embraced the state as a national playground. As development and population growth in the state progressed, the commercial marketing of mullet as food became increasingly marginal relative to its role as a sport-fishing bait for catching gamefish and the value of its roe as an export commodity. While changing demographic patterns stimulated new, leisure-based relationships to the seascapes, commercial fisheries and regional foodways based on mullet continued, however. For those with roots in the region, harvesting and eating mullet represented ongoing connections to the natural systems and cultural history of Florida, nurturing notions of communal rootedness and belonging in the face of profound changes to the physical, biological, and social structure of the place.

By the end of the century, the conflicts that J. Asakiah Williams had described in 1920 had reached a tipping point. Divergent notions about the proper social role for mullet—as food, bait, or element of trade—were implicit in the successful 1994 citizens’ ballot initiative, commonly known as the “net ban,” which outlawed the use of gill nets in inshore waters per an amendment to the state’s constitution. The commercial harvest and sale of mullet remains legal in Florida, but as gill nets are the most feasible means for catching the herbivorous species en masse, mullet has become less available and more expensive in the marketplace. Beyond its economic and environmental motivations and consequences, the campaign for this ballot initiative represented a continuation of long-

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term ideological disagreements within the state’s polity about which uses of the sea were considered to benefit the common good.\footnote{422}

In concluding this dissertation, I examine dimensions of these conflicts by tracing the twentieth century arc in the cultural life of Florida mullet as its dominant status shifted from “table” to “trash.” After decades of struggle by state officials with the species’ “image problem,” which hindered its reception on national dinner tables, Florida’s dominant body politic rendered mullet expendable and unnecessary as a source of public sustenance.\footnote{423} The devaluation of mullet and of the food-producing capacity of the state’s waterways enshrined recreational and aesthetic claims to the marine environment. Rather than a triumph of conservation, I argue, the embrace of a leisure-oriented seascape advanced century-old utilitarian understandings of the common good.

Demography, Destiny, and Fish-Fries

Slowed by the 1926 burst in the bubble of real estate speculation and the global economic Depression that followed, the process of fashioning Florida into an affordable American dreamscape gained momentum in the post-World War II decades. Initially fueling the growth of activities such as phosphate mining and timbering and, later, the


\footnote{423}{Florida mullet’s twentieth century “image problem” is discussed, for example, in James C. Cato, Philip B. Youngberg and Richard Raulerson, “Production, Prices and Marketing: An Economic Analysis of the Florida Mullet Fishery,” in Economics, Biology, and Food Technology of Mullet, ed. James C. Cato and William E. McCullough, Report No. 15, State University System of Florida, Sea Grant Program (August 1976), 17.}
development of coastal tourism and recreation industries, American capital and Anglo-American people infused the region. From its 1890 “wilderness” conditions, with fewer than 400,000 inhabitants, Florida’s population reached over 2.5 million by 1950 and nearly 16 million by the year 2000, a growth of almost 4,000 percent, the most dramatic increase of any state in the nation. Population density leapfrogged from under 10 people per square mile in 1900 to over 50 in 1950; by the year 2000, it had reached an average of about 295 people per square mile. “Demography is destiny,” quipped a noted social historian of the state. So great was the post-war migration of people from the North that some historians declared that the place could no longer be termed “a Southern state.” Increasing numbers of residents likewise rejected the cultural identity of “Southerner.”

After over a century of attempts to draw the state’s economy and culture into national social structures, the post-World War II population and development boom brought the nation to Florida.

For Northerners and others who rode the waves of postwar “consumption and abundance” and moved to or visited Florida, the coastlines and waterways of the state had special appeal. In an era of mobility and middle class prosperity, the promise of waterfront homes or vacation sites became accessible and alluring for retirees, veterans, and investors alike. From the 1950s onward, the concentration of the state’s population shifted from inland, agricultural regions to the coastal counties. Regions where sandy beaches existed, or could be constructed, were especially appealing to developers and

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Footnotes:

new residents. By 2010, over fourteen million of Florida’s nearly nineteen million residents lived in the state’s coastal zones, which comprised 55 percent of its land mass.\footnote{Mormino, \textit{Land of Sunshine}, “consumption and abundance,” 322. For concentration of population in coastal regions, see Florida Coastal Management Program, “Florida Assessment of Coast Trends 2010 (FACT 2010)” (Tallahassee: Florida Department of Environmental Protection, 2010). 11.}

Likewise, the physical and financial dimensions of recreational fishing and coastal tourism surged during the latter decades of the twentieth century. In 1987, over 600,000 pleasure boats were registered in the state and gross sales of recreational boats and motors in Florida amounted to about $1.7 million. By 2005, over 920,000 pleasure boats were registered and gross sales were just under $6 million. Overall contributions of the marine recreational industry to the state’s economy also ballooned: direct and indirect economic activity was estimated at about $2.7 billion in 1985 and over $18 billion for 2005.\footnote{For financial contributions of marine recreational industries to Florida’s economy, see Thomas J. Murray Associates, “Florida’s Recreational Marine Industry—Economic Impacts and Growth, 1980-2005,” report prepared for Marine Industries Association of Florida, Inc., November 2005. J. Frederick Bell, “Current and Projected Tourist Demand for Saltwater Recreational Fisheries in Florida,” Florida Sea Grant Report Number 111 (Gainesville: Florida Sea Grant College Program, May 1993). Walter Milon and Eric M. Thunberg, “A Regional Analysis of Current and Future Florida Resident Participation in Marine Recreational Fishing,” Florida Sea Grant Report Number 112 (Gainesville: Florida Sea Grant College Program, May 1993).}

Clearly the early-twentieth century dreams of propelling the state toward its destiny as a shoreline paradise had been fulfilled.

Amid these developments, mullet retained its standing as a classic Florida food, relished by long-term inhabitants of the region, and serving as a marker of attachment to the less-developed shape of the state. With an image of the fish appearing as the frontispiece of his book, journalist Al Burt, chronicler of the old-times ways and ordinary people of Florida, described the “Mullet Latitudes” as an imagined but real place existing “in the shade of the condos, between the rows of orange trees, among the mangrove-lined bays and inlets, in big cities and small.” Fellow narrator of off-the-beaten-track Florida, Patrick Smith, used a story of a deep-woods, Florida family serving fried mullet, grits, and buttermilk biscuits to a lonely, Northern stranger to symbolize continued traditions of...
rural, Southern hospitality in the face of the transformations wrought by population growth and development.427

Within the dreamscape of twentieth-century Florida, consumption of fried mullet was a political as well as literary symbol of grassroots, rural authenticity. At outdoor civic events in the state, in coastal and inland locales, mullet was “the fish-fry fish,” served alongside other classic Florida foods as swamp cabbage, hush puppies, grits, coleslaw, and sweet tea. For decades, this was typical fare at political rallies, patriotic gatherings, municipal celebrations, and fundraisers. With the mullet often donated by individual commercial harvesters or fish wholesalers, these events required massive quantities of fillets, which were breaded and deep-fried in large cast-iron kettles, work that was often performed by fishermen or seafood processors. At one such event, a 1963 fundraiser for the Florida Sheriffs Association Boys Ranch, the public was invited to eat their fill for the price of one dollar. As “happens every year,” a reporter wrote, the organizers quickly ran through their first one and a half tons of mullet, having to send for more. By the end of the event over five thousand people had been served. Attendance by candidates for local, county, and state office at public fish fries was de rigueur, and business leaders and politicians visiting from out of state often put in appearances as well.428 In the face of rapid urbanization, in-migration, and the growing economic


dominance of the tourist industry, the public act of eating fried mullet and other traditional foods was a way for politicians to assert connections to the common folk and to a “real Florida” lying beneath the artifice of theme parks and carefully manicured landscapes.\textsuperscript{429}

Not just a symbol, mullet remained an affordable, everyday food for people in the state and region. “Snapper, grouper, all of that’s good, but there is nothing any better than a mullet,” declared Apalachicola restaurant owner Joan Bouington in 1987. For her and many other twentieth century Floridians, the most common preparation was deep-fried fillets, generally coated with cornmeal and sometimes first dipped in buttermilk. Fried mullet with tomato sauce appeared on a Tampa café’s menu in the 1920s. Bouington’s restaurant also was famous for the stew and croquettes made from the species, while broiled and baked mullet was served in homes and restaurants. In some regions in the postwar decades, smoking whole fish—split open along the backbone, scales left on—over oak or other hardwood became popular, with individuals designing personal smokers fashioned out of such items as old refrigerators or fifty-five-gallon drums.\textsuperscript{430}

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palm, \textit{Sabal palmetto}, which is generally boiled with salt pork or other meat flavoring; otherwise known as “heart of palm,” it can also be eaten raw.

\textsuperscript{429} For a brief discussion of political and social importance of fish fries in Florida, see Dr. Robert Ingle, audio interview by Nancy Nusz, October 9, 1986, Apalachicola, Tape 2, Florida Maritime Heritage Survey (FMHS) for the Florida Folklife Program, recording archived at the American Folklife Center, Library of Congress (AFC). “Real Florida” has become a term used by writers and state officials to refer to cultural, biological, and physical aspects of the state that are rooted in the ecosystems, climate, and early history of the region, in contrast to more recent features that rely heavily on the built environment and contemporary technologies, including ubiquitous climate control. See for example Jeff Klinkenberg, \textit{Seasons of Real Florida} (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2004). Bill Belleville, \textit{Salvaging the Real Florida: Lost and Found in the State of Dreams} (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2011). Panhandle fisherman Leo Lovel’s collection of essays about a life of working Florida’s waters, including harvesting, cooking, and eating mullet and other seafood, conveys connections to “an era known as the ‘Old Florida,’ as those of us born and raised here have known it.” Leo Lovel, \textit{Spring Creek Chronicles: Stories of Commercial Fishin’, Huntin’, Workin’ and People Along the Gulf Coast} (Crawfordville: Spring Creek Restaurant, 2000), back cover. Florida’s Department of Environmental Protection has trademarked the term (Real Florida\textsuperscript{SM}) to brand its extensive state park service: http://www.dep.state.fl.us/parks/.

\textsuperscript{430} Joan Bouington, audio interview by Barbara Beauchamp, October 15, 1986, Apalachicola, FMHS for the Florida Folklife Program, recording archived at the AFC. For typical preparations of mullet in Florida restaurants, see “Florida Restaurant Menu
Mullet roe, as well as the gizzards of the bottom-grazing fish, had been a delight to Southern palates for centuries. Generally salted, dusted with cornmeal or flour, fried in lard or oil, and served with grits, the intact sacs of mullet eggs, called red or yellow roe, and so-called white roe (actually the sacs of milt or sperm) were seasonal specialties in Georgia, North Carolina, and other southeastern states in addition to Florida. White roe also was simmered and blended with celery and onions to make a dip, while mullet gizzards could be used in a stew or, more typically, soaked in buttermilk, dusted with self-rising flour, deep-fried, and served alongside cheese grits and turnip greens, for example. So tasty they were fought over, the gizzards generally were reserved for exclusive home consumption by fishing families as a privilege of those in-the-know. The flesh of the fish, once the roe had been removed, could be fried, baked, smoked, or salted.431

Preserving mullet by salting became less common, but the practice did not die out. Well into the twentieth century, home-salting the fillets, frying them, and eating them for breakfast with hoe cakes, onions, and sweet tea remained for some a bit of “salty, fishy heaven,” with a better taste and smell “than the best eggs and bacon and grits ever cooked.” In Florida and North Carolina, commercial fish houses continued to produce salted mullet, flesh and roe, to satisfy old-time hungers for the familiar preparation. Some older fishermen in the region would salt and press the red roe before drying it in the sun for several days, after which they could keep it “in their pockets and

eat it like beef jerky in their boats.” This practice recalled the “botango” southwest Florida’s Spanish fishermen prepared from mullet roe, as described by Bernard Romans in the eighteenth century.432 Within the twentieth century contours of the region, these centuries-old food traditions and the cultural identities associated with them may have been overshadowed, but they were not erased.

### Coping With Mullet’s Image Problem

In the second half of the twentieth century, as the value of coastal property soared, sport-fishing boomed, and beach-going leisure became the dominant ethos of the region, the cultural position of mullet became increasingly ambiguous. Attributed to its long history of feeding the masses, mullet’s “image problem” persistently plagued researchers and state officials.433 Fishery publications celebrated the increasing national popularity for such Florida-harvested species as red snapper (“among the State’s noted food fishes”), pompano (the state’s “fish de-luxe”), and shrimp (“Shrimp is king”), but mullet-

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harvesting came to be viewed in crisis terms, as the “number one commercial fishery problem” within the state. Mullet stocks were deemed to be abundant and the volume of harvests remained high—between 1955 and 1994, Florida’s commercial fishermen annually landed an average of about 27 million pounds of striped or black mullet (*Mugil cephalus*)—but dockside prices (the amounts received by fishermen) stayed low.\(^{434}\)

The lack of modern harvesting, processing, and packaging methods led to precipitous declines in market value, while the absence of professional systems of management, inspection, and salesmanship hindered possibilities for national commercialization of the species. Between 1952 and 1973, the price-per-pound fishermen received from dealers for mullet ranged from as little as 5.25 cents to a high of 11.03 cents. In 1957, under pressure from fish dealers to increase mullet revenues, the Board of Conservation ended the one to two-month ban on commercial harvest during the fall and winter spawning months, which had been in place since 1915. Along Florida’s West Coast, the “plight of mullet fishermen is one of the greatest unsolved problems of the fishing industry,” a 1959 federal fishery report concluded. The concerns of state and federal fisheries personnel included the low incomes of Florida’s inshore fisherman, minimal profits for wholesalers, and minimal revenue generated for the state.\(^{435}\)


As had been the case since the U.S. Fish Commission first paid attention to the economic potential of Florida’s waters in the late nineteenth century, localized production and consumption was perceived to be at the heart of the mullet problem. As the foundation of the U.S. economy was steered toward nationwide distribution systems and mass production and consumption in the post-World War II period, mullet was little known or favored outside of its customary southeastern circuit of production and consumption. Southern fish—of which mullet was the highest-volume species—sold weakly within Northern markets, except among “the negro population and persons who have migrated from the South,” according to a fish-buyer for the North Central region of the Great Atlantic and Pacific Tea Company (A & P). In addition to lack of familiarity with Southern species, the problem was shoddy processing and transportation: “It’s simply a matter of too much fish, too little refrigerant,” the A & P buyer deemed.436

Poorly iced or salted, still often shipped in barrels, and generally sold as whole fish rather than as fillets, supplies of Florida-harvested mullet exceeded demand within the U.S. postwar “Consumers’ Republic.” As a marketing researcher for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service observed in 1950, “Mrs. American Housewife” increasingly shopped at self-service markets and sought standardized quantities of prepared items, packaged in cans or clear, cellophane wrapping. Responsible for the majority of the work of procuring food and preparing family meals, postwar American women who served seafood at home increasingly preferred items such as frozen, deveined shrimp; canned and dated picked crab meat; and fresh or frozen fillets of fish. Gone were the days of the “pushcart peddler of piscatorial products,” a 1951 Florida fisheries report stated. Nevertheless, wholesalers in the state were making little progress in adapting to the


“package market,” with the exception of experimentation with freezing and cold storage of shrimp and improved processing techniques for red snapper fillets. Bulk production and sloppy handling of fresh, whole mullet leant it little appeal to customers not already familiar with the species.437

With the nation’s households increasingly expected to conform to the “middle-class values of simplicity, managerial efficiency, and refinement,” the mess and smell of processing and cooking mullet and other whole fish within the home fell outside postwar ideologies of domesticity. Advocating for the logistical and economic feasibility of air-freight shipments of freshly frozen, processed seafood from coastal fisheries to markets throughout the United States, a researcher cited a print advertisement for an electronic household air purifier, which featured “a housewife’s fish cooking dilemma.” Wearing a gas mask in order to cope with the smell of frying fish, the woman in the ad responds to her husband’s complaints about the odor by deciding that she can no longer prepare seafood at home—at least until she purchases a “Good-Aire” appliance. The way to market Southern fish that northern women could comfortably serve in their homes, the researcher argued, was to ice the harvest aboard-ship, keep it cool or frozen at every point in transit, handle the species carefully, and package it attractively.438

Throughout the postwar decades mullet remained the backbone of Florida’s fishing industry and researchers continually sought ways to improve the value of the species and thereby increase the economic productivity of the state’s inshore fisheries. Some of these efforts were technological, focused largely on solving the problem of “oxidative rancidity.” Because of its high concentrations of unsaturated fats, mullet tends

to develop an unpleasant flavor once the processed flesh is exposed to oxygen, even when frozen, and thus is best eaten soon after harvest. During this period, regional scientists conducted numerous laboratory experiments aimed at developing antioxidant treatments that would improve the long-term preservation quality of mullet fillets while not impairing the flavor or changing the color.\textsuperscript{439}

Technological solutions were combined with social approaches to broadening the commercial appeal of mullet. Beginning in 1953, the University of Miami’s Marine Laboratory engaged in marketing research, with support from the state Board of Conservation and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. One result of this program was the distribution to wholesalers and retailers of a handout describing the techniques and economic parameters involved in commercializing smoked mullet, hitherto a backyard art, “common in the villages and cities along [Florida’s] seacoasts and…lakes.”

Suggested market outlets included produce and fish truck routes, delicatessens, roadside stands and bars, as well as restaurants, supermarkets, and grocery stores. Demand for the product, the authors predicted, would be seasonal, centered in tourist and agricultural areas, and heightened by packaging the product attractively and sealing it carefully. To further improve the “depressed condition” of the mullet fishery, development of southeastern markets for “by-products” (such as the roe and gizzards) also was proposed. Smoking was not viewed as a means of extending shelf life but rather of stimulating interest in mullet as a food among new residents and visitors to the state.\textsuperscript{440}

The notion of packaging smoked mullet as an edible component of Florida’s postwar tourist development had some success. Located in Pasadena Beach on Florida’s


Gulf Coast, one casual restaurant well known for serving smoked mullet through the latter decades of the twentieth century and up to the present, Ted Peters Famous Smoked Fish, had its origins in this period. In 1951, the eponymous restaurant owner, a New York “snow bird [who] came south in search of warmer climes,” used the smoking process as an attraction, moving it to the roadside center stage as a visual and olfactory appeal to drivers passing by en route to the beach and other shoreline recreations. Another beachside restaurant, L. J. and Shirley Touchton’s Mullet Inn on the shore of Old Tampa Bay along Courtney Campbell Causeway, just west of Tampa’s Rocky Point, operated from the late 1950s through the early 1980s. Advertising its smoked mullet, shrimp, mackerel, chicken, and ribs with the slogan, “The Fish We Serve Today Slept Last Night in Tampa Bay,” the Mullet Inn’s informal ambience was so popular among families, beach-goers, and young people that wistful memories of the place and its food remain prominent to this day.441

Among Florida newcomers, shoreline restaurants such as the Mullet Inn and Ted Peters’ Smoked Fish helped popularize smoked mullet as part of the “destination image” of the state as a site of beach-oriented recreation. The fish became integrated into the “playground of the nation” motif as people were introduced to the species as a tasty snack

that would compliment a day of sun, sand, and saltwater. After World War II, Tampa fisherman Grady “Bud” Albury noted, smoked mullet became available on many corner stands and was popular among the many military veterans who settled in Florida after having served in or transited through the state during the war. In contrast to the aura of class privilege that developed around the twentieth century consumption of stone crabs in South Florida, smoked mullet, served at informal beachfront stands or markets, was food for ordinary folks on holiday from workaday routines.\(^{442}\)

The casual consumption of smoked mullet in the postwar decades represented a shift not only in dominant modes of preparing the species, but also a movement away from the centuries-old cultural understanding of the fish as a dependable source of everyday sustenance. Albury echoed the observation of other fishermen and the popular media in observing that mullet was always the “bread and butter” along Florida’s Gulf Coast: “They say, ‘Son, when there ain’t no mullet, your belly’s pinching your backbone,’ ” he reflected, referring to the species’ history of staving off hunger for poor, southeastern families. By the dawn of the twenty-first century, for many residents of southwest Florida, living memories of the role of mullet as a fundamental staple had faded, replaced by regard for smoked mullet as an iconic food, the consumption of which “border[ed] on the sacramental.” Such sentiments suggest that this new marketing mechanism for mullet soon became incorporated into the “cultural personality” of the

rapidly developing region of southwest Florida. Overshadowed in the process were more deeply rooted preparations and marketing systems for the species, such as the purchase of bulk quantities of mullet for home-salting and the distribution of fresh mullet in the countryside via pick-up trucks. Within a state populace increasingly dominated by recent migrants, the culturally and historically significant meanings entailed in traditional uses of mullet were fading from dominant consciousness.

A Fish By Any Other Name

The appeal of smoked mullet did little to elevate the regard for fresh mullet among modern consumers looking for quick and easy meals to prepare at home. Because it remained the highest-volume finfish harvested in Florida, mullet’s substandard national status continued to trouble state officials, a concern which eventually was met with an act of rhetorical desperation. By the 1960s, not only was the species no longer referred to as Florida’s “money fish,” it was no longer called “mullet” in official parlance. Reasoning that low sales of the fish partly were due to confusion among Northern consumers between the Southern Mugil cephalus and a Northern “trash fish” also called mullet, in 1962 the Florida Board of Conservation formally changed the name of Florida’s fish to Southern Mugil cephalus.

443 Albury, phone conversation with the author, July 7, 2004. Bob Morris, “A Meditation on Mullet: Smoking Out Southwest Florida’s Archetypal Fish,” Sarasota Magazine 26, no. 6 (March 2004): “Here’s a good way to tell if someone has a real connection to Southwest Florida: Ask if we like smoked mullet…For us, smoked mullet is more than mere food; it borders on the sacramental,” 124. Howard Wight Marshall suggests that food traditions are central, and constantly shifting, “ingredient[s] in the cultural personality of any region,” part of “the intricate and impulsive system that joins culture and geography into regional character.” Marshall, “Meat Preservation on the Farm in Missouri’s ‘Little Dixie’, ” Journal of American Folklore 92, no. 366 (Oct.-Dec. 1979): 416, 400. See also George H. Lewis, “The Maine Lobster as Regional Icon,” Food and Foodways 3, no. 4 (1989): 303-316. The deep cultural history of mullet as a quintessential Florida food casts doubt on the suggestion by John T. Edge that the establishment of Ted Peters’ restaurant not only was a step in the commercialization of smoked mullet, but that this eatery, founded by a postwar migrant to the state, was a pioneer in seeing the food potential of the species: Peters “did not singularly rescue the fish from ignominy, but he did, over the course of a forty-odd-year career, convince a good number of locals and tourists that mullet was worthy of a taste,” Southern Belly, 62.

444 For mullet as Florida’s “money fish,” see Shell Fish Division, Florida State Department of Agriculture, Second Biennial Report, image caption, n.p. FWP, Florida Seafood Cookery, 27.
“lisa,” the Spanish name for the species (and the species name for another variety of mullet). The change in appellation, officials hoped, would bolster sales of canned and smoked mullet shipped out of state, which would help Florida fishermen find new outlets for their abundant harvests of the fish. U.S. Bureau of Commercial Fisheries scientists also experimented with developing better techniques for canning mullet to increase its marketing capacity. Legal requirements specified that the name of a packaged food product match the name commonly used by a significant proportion of the population; given the state’s large Spanish-speaking populace, Florida officials were able to claim truth in advertising for their linguistic slight of hand.445

The underlying concern of state officials, it seemed, was that for too many consumers, especially those living in or coming from outside the state, the “plain and dowdy black mullet…was from the wrong side of the epicurean tracks,” as a reporter for the Miami News put it. According to Randolph Hodge, Director of Florida’s Board of Conservation, marketing research had determined that mullet possessed “no meaningful identity throughout most of the U.S.,” though Florida residents might find that difficult to believe, he added. At least two canning operations opened up, one in the Manatee County town of Palmetto and one in Levy County’s Cedar Key, both of them marketing the product with the new name. “Cortez Brand Lisa,” read the blue and red label produced at Palmetto’s Palma Sola Packing plant.446


446 Randolph Hodges’ comment that “the term mullet has no meaningful identity throughout most of the U.S.,” is in “‘Lisa’ Now Official Name,” Daytona Beach Morning Journal, August 12, 1962, 4A. Mullet as “from the wrong side of the epicurean tracks” and details of the Cedar Key mullet cannery are in Jones, “Mullet Now Baits
Most Floridians seemed to agree that the marketing ploy had little to no effect in stimulating northern demand for the species and many state residents ridiculed the name change. A little girl named Lisa reportedly wrote to Hodge to ask how he would like it if someone named a fish Randolph. Satirizing the notion that mullet could ever claim a “place on America’s dinnertable,” a columnist in the Ocala Star-Banner mused about options for “glamourizing” other underdog fish, suggesting “LeChat” for catfish. One effect the “lisa” label might have had, however, is to confirm that the humble and hearty mullet—accessible, affordable, healthy, and tasty—would always be a “local fish” produced by what J. Asakiah Williams had called Florida’s “home fishermen,” which he defined as those who produced food fish rather than other products such as fertilizer or those who fished for sport. He might have added that such fishermen generally harvested a species primarily eaten at home in Florida or other southeastern states.  

The tensions between commercial net fisheries and the sport fishing industry that Williams had foreseen early in the century gave rise to further changes in mullet’s status as a staple on the Florida table. With the increased economic importance and physical presence of the state’s recreational fisheries, many of the state’s late twentieth century population defined mullet as “bait” rather than food. From the 1950s onward, sports columnists writing for Florida newspapers praised the usefulness of mullet as a means for catching a variety of gamefish: “Florida’s all-around champ, when it comes to bait, is mullet,” wrote a Miami News reporter in 1957, praising the ability of the species to hook barracuda, dolphin, blue runner, snapper, and grouper.  

Diners.” Details about Palmetto’s mullet cannery are in “Lisa, the Lowly Mullet Winning Top Shelf Status.”  

Mention of the complaint by a young, human Lisa about the name change is in Bob Stiff, “Mullet-Lisa Name Stew Simmers Down,” St. Petersburg Times, January 31, 1966, 2B. The satirical suggestion that catfish ought to be glamorized equally is in Joy Howard, “How About LeChat?” Ocala Star-Banner, January 30, 1963, 11. Tongue firmly in cheek, Howard reminds readers of the rationale for the name change: “In true Madison fashion, a new image was created for mullet, I mean Lisa. It is now canned and shipped to northern markets to take its rightful place on America’s dinnertable.” Williams’ discussions of mullet as a “local fish” and of Florida’s “home fishermen” are in Shell Fish Commission, Florida State Department of Agriculture, Third Biennial Report, 27, 19.  

Sports writers enthusiastically described the fall migrations of mullet not as aggregations of a food source but as attractors of the desirable game fish that fed on them. “One of the main reasons fishing is so good in South Florida during the winter is the annual fall migration of mullet,” wrote a Palm Beach Post-Times reporter in 1970, describing the growth of a commercial industry for harvesting mullet as bait. While the species mentioned in that article was white (Mugil curema) rather than striped or black mullet (M. cephalous), in the minds of many late-twentieth century residents of and visitors to Florida, mullet was mullet, and that meant “bait,” at best. Many more viewed the species as “a trash fish, a bottom-feeder, a scavenger, and the lowest of the low,” a fish without value or desirability as a food. According to a reporter for the Atlanta Journal and Constitution, the species is “one of those trash foods for which the South, with its rich history of poverty, seems to have a special affinity.” The word itself, he wrote, “almost sounds dirty, like a lump of mud sprouted fins,” although the actual fish makes for fine eating, he conceded. By the early twenty-first century, the question of whether mullet was even edible appeared in several online sport-fishing forums, to which some responded with a qualified yes, but one should not bother.

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As the twentieth century progressed, the association of mullet consumption with Southern poverty and low socioeconomic status continually diminished the reputation of the species, inside and outside of Florida. Deep-fried mullet and sautéed roe may have been cherished by “soul-food cooks,” as claimed in a 1981 cookbook, but for some who grew up with such food traditions, the species conveyed shameful associations. Advising African Americans how to maintain a middle-class standard of living in the face of inflation, an article published in *Ebony* magazine in 1979 advocated working two jobs and encouraging all work-age members of the family to seek employment, rather than accepting “ego-deflating sacrifices like giving up steak and shrimp for hamburger and mullet.” Because foodways associated with mullet flesh, roe, and gizzards were circumscribed by the geographic and cultural boundaries of the South, preparing and consuming the fish bespoke an identity that many Americans outside of the region—including some migrants from it—associated with backwardness and inferiority.

According to Pine Island mullet processor and purveyor Mel Long, the consumption of the species by poor and rural populations of Georgia and northern and middle Florida, rather than wealthier groups and new residents of South Florida, was what helped give the fish “a bad name.” Once she began selling a dip made from smoked mullet, which distanced the comestible from visual and verbal connections to the fish itself, the stigma associated with the species as a food began to vanish:

> I had a joke that [around] Useppa people and Sanibel people and all the rich people, I had to call it mullet *pâté*, because they were crazy for it, it was like once they had it, they were just addicted...For the poor people it’s mullet *dip* or mullet *spread*, but once they’ve discovered it, it’s like, ‘Wow, so, we thought mullet was bait.’ You know, it’s like, ‘No, we’ve been eating it for a long time.’

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The impulse to adorn the common food fish with alternate names—lisa for the fish, pâté for spread—underscores the observation that many fish, including mullet, are treated as bait or as an undesired “trash” fish because they are “savored with prejudices as well as with taste buds.” If eating a luxury seafood like stone crabs helped visitors and new residents develop personal connections to the idea of Florida as an exotic paradise, eating mullet linked consumers to plebeian lifestyles and history.452

Underutilized Fish and the Export Gold Mine

As the flesh of the species was becoming better known as a food for other fish rather than people, researchers turned to developing “more markets and new products” from mullet in order to realize the potential of the fish to generate wealth. In 1975, a team of researchers from the University of Florida and the National Marine Fisheries Service formed the “Mullet Research Coordinating Committee” in order to resolve the perennial mullet problem. Ample evidence existed, they concluded, that mullet was “not being overfished” and that, on the contrary, within Florida waters much greater quantities of the species were “available for commercial utilization than currently marketed.” From the 1940s onward, Florida fish wholesalers distributed millions of pounds of fresh, iced mullet a year to seafood markets, grocery stores, supermarkets, and restaurants within the state and to Georgia and Alabama wholesalers via trucks and, eventually, refrigerated tractor-trailers. Federal and state officials nevertheless agreed that the species was “underutilized” and remained determined to find new avenues for adding value to the bottom-feeding, underappreciated species. The development of export markets for the roe

452 Mel Long’s observations are in Steve and Mel Meo Long, interview by the author. Mullet as among the “underutilized species” that are “savored with prejudices,” is in Gi-Pyo Hong, Jhung Won Hwang, and Michael Paparella, “Miscellaneous and Underutilized Species,” in The Seafood Industry, ed. Roy E. Martin and George J. Flick (New York, NY: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1990), 104. In “Eating the Claws of Eden,” 477, Mink argues that customers at Joe’s Stone Crab restaurant in South Miami Beach not only consume the crustacean itself but also a “framework for understanding [their] consumption,” which taps into “the most important images of a paradisiacal Florida.”
proved to be the long-sought gold mine, catapulting the fish to fame and its fishermen to infamy.\footnote{Cato, “Dockside Price Analysis,” “more markets and new products,” 13.}

On the heels of high-level security and trade negotiations between U.S. President Richard Nixon and Japanese Prime Minister Kakuei Tanaka in 1972, Japanese fishery dealers flooded the marketing departments of NMFS and the Florida Department of Natural Resources (Florida DNR) with inquiries about the possibilities for importing U.S. seafood products. Later in the year, federal and state marketing specialists and economists visited Japan, where they found that mullet roe was of particular interest. Referred to as \textit{karasumi} in Japanese and \textit{wūyůzi} in Chinese, the carefully salted, pressed, and dried ovary sacs of mullet are a delicacy in many Asian countries, historically presented as tribute to royal families and currently eaten as a harbinger of luck for the Lunar New Year and as part of a fine meal in restaurants and at home. Although the basic process of transforming mullet egg sacs into deep orange blocks of \textit{karasumi} does not differ greatly from the centuries-old Spanish-Florida preparation of botargo, the difference between the cultural significance of the product within the southeastern United States and within Asia was immense.\footnote{Details of the development of the Japanese export market for Florida mullet roe, including trade negotiations, processing requirements, and wholesale and retail prices, are in J. T. Brawner and C. B. Davies, “The Impact of Export Opportunities on Southeastern Fisheries,” \textit{Proceedings of the Annual Gulf and Caribbean Fisheries Institute} 26 (Coral}
Also dramatically different were the financial yields to be generated. If processed according to exacting Japanese standards, U.S. fishery experts learned, mullet roe from Florida and other southeastern states could wholesale for up to twenty dollars per pound and retail for forty-five dollars a pound. Demand and prices shifted upward almost immediately, and NMFS analysts predicted that careful domestic processing of the roe could triple the product’s value, with sales’ potential as high as one hundred tons annually. Because fishermen predominantly sold whole fish rather than stripped sacs of roe, they earned a fraction of the wholesale price, but such figures nonetheless resulted in considerable improvements in earnings. From 1967 through 1971, annual dockside prices for whole mullet averaged about eight cents per pound. In 1974, as the export market was expanding and demand for the species increased, dockside prices ranged between twelve and fourteen cents per pound. By the late 1980s, prices averaged thirty-seven cents per pound annually, with fishermen earning about one dollar and thirty cents per pound for whole fish during spawning season. At the peak of the boom in the roe export market, fishermen recalled the seafood dealers paying as much as two dollars and fifty cents to two dollars and seventy-five cents per pound for whole, “red roe” (female) mullet, an unheard-of dockside price for the historically humble species.\(^{455}\)

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Interest in importing mullet from Florida spread to other countries. In the late 1970s, NMFS and Florida DNR were joined by other organizations, such as the Gulf and South Atlantic Fisheries Development Foundation and the Florida Sea Grant Marine Advisory Program, all of which endeavored to provide the seafood industry with “institutional support” for introducing southeastern fishery products, including mullet and its roe, to global markets. Through participation in trade missions and shows, these agencies sought to expand U.S. seafood exports in order to reduce foreign trade deficits and reach “fuller utilization of presently unutilized and underutilized” domestic fishery species, as mandated by the 1976 Fishery Conservation and Management Act. By 1980, the flesh and roe of mullet were the top two seafood exports from the southeastern United States, with shrimp being the third. Taiwan and Japan became leading importers, but other Asian, European, Middle Eastern, and African countries also became significant export markets for Florida mullet. While total annual landings for striped mullet harvested from the state’s Gulf Coast waters actually decreased after the expansion of the roe market, the overall value of the fishery increased significantly. From 1950 through 1973, annual landings averaged about twenty-seven million pounds, for an average value of about two million dollars. Between 1974 and 1993, landings averaged about twenty-two million pounds, with an average value of about six million dollars.456


While the state-sponsored development of export opportunities for mullet roe fueled the long-awaited surge in value for southwest Florida’s most abundant fish, the new markets created a number of additional difficulties. According to long-term fishermen, the spike in value for the fish during spawning season precipitated the entry of hundreds of part-time fishermen, sometimes referred to as “bean-pickers” in reference to the seasonal nature of their fishing. In 1987, about one-third of Florida’s 3,240 licensed mullet harvesters fished part-time. Many of these, some full-time commercial fishermen claimed, were able to afford the boats, gear, and fuel needed to engage in the industry because of “subsidies” received from non-fishing employment, retirement income, or trafficking in illegal drugs. A number of commercial fishermen in Florida, recalling the bonanza years of the mullet roe export market, reported that large numbers of people in other occupations—police officers, fire fighters, construction workers—would take a leave from their full-time jobs to harvest mullet during the spawning season, earning tens of thousands of dollars in a month or two.457

Such part-timers tended to be ignorant or heedless of the legal parameters and unwritten social mores that govern commercial fishing. Most older, long-term fishermen in Florida started out as children crewing on launches that were powered by inboard motors, serving as a “mother ship” for several small skiffs, which were maneuvered by push-poles. The cotton or flax gill nets that were in use until the 1940s needed constant maintenance and only could be deployed in particular environments. Such slow-paced, labor-intensive technologies required—and generated—a high level of understanding of the ecological and social dynamics of the marine environment. After the advent of nylon gill nets in the 1950s (and, subsequently, monofilament), and the introduction of shallow-

draft “kicker” boats equipped with outboard motors, basic net-fishing and boat operation skills could be learned after only a few trips with an experienced fisherman. With no regulatory restrictions on entry into the fishery, and with the incentive to make large amounts of money in a short period of time, these gear developments allowed amateur fishermen to flood the industry, according to many longstanding commercial fishing folk. Motivated by greed, Pine Island fisherman Danny Holloway recounted, newcomers to the mullet industry did things like “running nets around [residential] docks, bumping into their docks, running it around bridges. Going in canals and waking people up, and doing different things that was just stupid.” Such practices angered coastal residents, leant members of the industry a bad reputation, and added fuel to the long-standing conflicts between the commercial and recreational fishing industries in the state.  

Another negative consequence of the expanded roe market involved increased problems in selling the body of the fish. During spawning season the oil-rich, dark-muscle quotient of mullet is higher, making it even more prone to rancidity. This biological property of the species hindered technical dimensions of freezing the fish for long periods, while the costs of freezer storage space relative to the low value for whole or filleted mullet limited the economic feasibility of long-term storage. Lured by the bait of higher revenues, fishermen who increased targeting of mullet during roe season often were left with quantities of flesh that were difficult to market. Various approaches to dealing with the excess fish were raised, including additional experiments with improved canning techniques; marketing the fillets to chain restaurants; and incorporating frozen or canned mullet into the menus of state institutions, such as school lunch programs, hospitals, or prisons. Other suggestions for dealing with mullet flesh as a by-product of roe extraction included transforming it into minced or dried fish products, to be exported.
to Asian or Latin American countries or used as a supplement to animal feeds. These initiatives showed limited success, but the primary usage of the “split” or “spent” carcass of the fish, sans eggs, was as bait for crab traps.459

In the early years of the roe export boom, unknown quantities of mullet bodies also ended up in the trash. Because of the difficulty in marketing the quantities of flesh that remained after the roe had been stripped, carcasses were dumped by the ton in Florida landfills. State statutes forbade destruction of food fish, but the practice was considered legal as long as the roe was used as food. While within the bounds of the law, the literal conversion of mullet to trash by individual fishermen and seafood processors was an affront to many members of the public, including professional fishermen. Tampa fisherman Bud Albury recalled having seen about fifty thousand pounds of mullet that a seafood wholesaler had dumped at a Hillsborough County landfill:

And what they’d do, they’d just barely cover it with dirt. And there was just hundreds of mullet heads sticking through the dirt. And this boy [who worked at the landfill] wasn’t a fisherman, but he grew up around ‘em. He said, ‘You know this is a crime?’ I said, ‘I’ll agree with you one hundred percent.’…They only wanted the roe. You know what I’m talking about? Just give me the roe.

In addition to disposal of spent mullet in landfills, some fishermen discarded whole “white roe” (male) mullet at sea, rather than bother with the much lower price fish houses paid for them: “You used to see fish floating everywhere. White roe mullet!” Albury remembered with disgust. For those whose dedication to the commercial fishing

profession stemmed in large part from the pride generated by producing a healthy, affordable food for common people in the region, such waste was deeply disturbing.\footnote{Albury, interview by the author, October 24, 2003. Debra DiGiacomandrea, “The Mullet Market: Once a ‘Dumped’ Fish, Mullet Finds World Favor,” \textit{The Evening Independent}, December 4, 1981, 14A.}

Many commercial fishermen expressed similar sentiments about the detrimental consequences of the influx of inexperienced and often irresponsible fishermen and the incentive to maximize profits. The roe market “was probably the worst thing” that could have happened to Florida’s inshore fishermen, according to Danny Holloway:

> Because people, when you dangle a big enough orange in front of their face, they’re going to want to peel it, you know. And that’s what they did…I had a couple of the old-timers that fished here all their life tell me, ‘Boy, that’s the worse thing that ever happened to us, that price getting up like that.’ And back then I was like, ‘What are you, crazy? This is good!’ No, it wasn’t good…If they’d’ve never got that high, you wouldn’t have had all them people fishing for ‘em.

Eventually, the practice of consigning the flesh of mullet to the trash diminished as new export markets were developed and countries such as Venezuela, Egypt, Nigeria, Romania, and Haiti began importing “white roe” and gutted mullet from Florida. The image of dumped fish was seared in the minds of many Florida residents, however. In a 1994 letter to the editor, for example, an outraged Sarasota man described a documentary he had viewed, which depicted “a small boat gill-netting for mullet. It showed two men hauling in the net while a third man was slitting open the mullet and removing the roe. The fish were tossed overboard. They say that mullet roe is like gold, while the mullet themselves have little value.”\footnote{Holloway, interview by the author. Similar sentiments are expressed in Levens, interview by the author. For expanding export market for whole and gutted mullet, see DiGiacomandrea, “The Mullet Market.” Bell, phone conversation with the author, August 12, 2013. Description of documentary is from Dave Fielding (Sarasota), Letter to the Editor: “Net Ban Will Save Fish Stocks,” \textit{Sarasota Herald Tribune}, October 17, 1994, 8A.} To a large degree, Florida’s expanded roe export market was the source of the commercial fishing industry’s tarnished reputation, establishing a connection in the public consciousness between mullet-fishing, wanton greed, and environmental destruction. That this late-twentieth century development was the brain-child of state and federal institutions—and an outgrowth of century-long, government-
sponsored efforts to raise the status of mullet and the value of Florida’s fisheries—was not widely recognized.

Assessing the Status of Mullet: Science and Public Activism

In the 1980s, the presumed mullet crisis quickly shifted from the perception of too little harvest to too much. Through 1985, few scientists or regulatory agencies in the region expressed concern about the status of mullet populations in Florida’s Gulf Coast waters. In that year, a U.S. Fish and Wildlife “species profile” of south Florida’s striped mullet stocks outlined various biological characteristics—taxonomy, range, life history, and ecological role, for example—before briefly touching on the nature of the fisheries and its management regimes. About the latter, the report reached familiar conclusions: catch-per-unit-effort and average size of the harvested fish appeared unchanged, suggesting that “lack of demand rather than a scarcity of mullet limits the fishing” for the species. Within three years, such nonchalant inferences were a thing of the past.

After decades of being labeled an “underutilized species,” Florida mullet came under closer scientific and regulatory scrutiny in the late 1980s, partly in response to the engagement of recreational fishing activists in the commercial fisheries management process. Responding to “a general concern” among conservation and sport-fishing interests about increased targeting of mullet during spawning season and perceptions of declining abundance, the state’s Marine Fisheries Commission (MFC) initiated investigations on the status of mullet in 1988. During this period, a team of natural

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463 Established in 1983 by order of the state legislature’s Saltwater Fisheries Study and Advisory Council, the MFC’s role was to propose saltwater fishery regulations (commercial and recreational) to the offices of the Governor and Cabinet, which would pass or defeat them after a series of public hearings. Formal challenges to the Governor and Cabinet’s rulings could be posed by the MFC and outside organizations, including conservation groups and industry lobbyists, commercial and recreational. Challenges were adjudicated by the Division of Administrative Hearings (DOAH), whose rulings could be further challenged in the 1st District Court of Appeals and even further to the Florida Supreme Court. In 1998, per a citizens’ ballot initiative, the MFC and the Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission were abolished and a new umbrella regulatory institution, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, was created. For
resource economists from the University of Florida began analyzing the projected impacts that harvesting restrictions would have on commercial fishing landings and income. New regulations were imposed in 1989, which primarily included weekend closures on harvesting mullet during roe season and minimum mesh-size requirements on gill nets. Mullet also was declared a “restricted species,” meaning that in order to target the fish, those with a commercial fishing license had to obtain a special endorsement, a measure aimed at reducing part-timers in the fishery.464

At the same time, the Florida Marine Research Institute (FMRI)—then, a division of the Florida DNR—began a biological research program focused on mullet.465 Based on data collected independent of commercial fishery landings, this was the first comprehensive, scientific analysis ever conducted regarding the status of the species in Florida waters. According to the principal mullet fishery scientist for the state, the goal of

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464 Chronology of regulations primarily is from Marston and Nelson, “New Directions in the Management of Florida’s Marine Fisheries.” The restricted species endorsement was available to people who earned at least $2,500 from commercial fishing, an income qualification that certain coastal legislators pushed for but was far too low to be effective, as noted in Marston and Nelson, “New Directions in the Management of Florida’s Marine Fisheries,” 48. Many full-time commercial fishermen at the time were strongly in support of implementing a more rigorous limited entry program and believed that the bar for restricted species endorsement should have been at least fifty percent of total income in order to effectively reduce part-time fishing effort (personal observation). For University of Florida analysis, see Adams, Degner, and Moss, “An Economic Analysis of Potential Regulatory Changes.” For definition of “restricted species,” see Florida Statutes, Title XXVIII, Chapter 379:

465 Between 1988 and 2003, Florida Marine Research Institute (FMRI) was the name of the state’s fisheries research institute. In 2004, the name was changed to the Fish and Wildlife Research Institute (FWRI). See Gil McRae, “A History of Florida’s Fish and Wildlife Research Institute,” Gulf of Mexico Science 28, no. 1-2 (2010), 173-179.
this and other FMRI stock assessment programs was to collect data about the
“population, biology, and life history dynamics” of particular species in order to produce
“accurate and useful information for the management decision-making processes.” In
January 1991, the FMRI issued a preliminary stock assessment for mullet. This report
estimated that the Spawning Potential Ratio (SPR) for Florida’s west coast mullet
populations was between 15 percent to 20 percent. As an indicator of the ability of a
population to reproduce itself under fishing pressure, an SPR of 30 to 35 percent was the
norm established by national and international fisheries’ biologists as a minimum
acceptable threshold.466

As a result of the stock assessment, the MFC determined that the time had come
to restrict fishing effort during spawning season, while still leaving room for harvesting
and marketing mullet as a customary food-fish for people in Florida and the southeastern
region. Having decided that the fishery ought to managed “in a manner which maximized
the opportunities for the traditional mullet food fishery,” the MFC established an SPR
target of 35 percent. The State-Federal Fisheries Management Committee of the Gulf
States Marine Fisheries Commission (GSMFC), a compact of the five states bordering
the Gulf of Mexico, also met in 1991 and agreed that overharvesting of mullet during
spawning season was of great concern and that an interstate Fishery Management Plan
for the species was needed. The MFC proposed additional regulations, which would have
cut the permissible harvesting period during spawning season by half on Florida’s

in the West Coast of Florida,” State of Florida, Department of Natural Resources
Memorandum, to Russell Nelson (Executive Director of MFC), January 27, 1991,
courtesy of Behzad Mahmoudi. Details of FMRI mullet stock assessment work are in
Behzad Mahmoudi, “Status and Trends in the Florida Mullet Fishery and an Updated
See also McRae, “A History of Florida’s Fish and Wildlife Research Institute.” For
“population, biology, and life history dynamics” and “accurate and useful information,”
see Behzad Mahmoudi, audio interview by the author, November 15, 2002, Florida
Marine Research Institute, St. Petersburg, Florida. Additional information on mullet
status and SPRs is from Marston and Nelson, “New Directions,” and from Richard Leard,
Behzad Mahmoudi, Harry Blanchet, Henry Lazauski, Kyle Spiller, Mike Buchanon,
Christopher Dyer, and Walter Keithly, The Striped Mullet Fishery of the Gulf of Mexico,
United States: A Regional Management Plan Gulf States Marine Fisheries Commission
(Ocean Springs, MS: December 1995), especially 9-1—9-4, 11-1.
southwest coast, the primary region for the roe harvest. After a series of contentious public hearings and organized opposition by mullet roe wholesalers and the Organized Fishermen of Florida (OFF), the state’s leading inshore commercial fishing lobbying group, the additional rules were not implemented.467

During this period, sport-fishing organizations intensified their efforts to persuade Florida’s fisheries management regime that commercial fishing in the state’s inshore waters ought to be dramatically curtailed, if not eliminated. Beginning in 1985, concerns over declining abundance of red fish (*Sciaenops ocellatus*) prompted some members of the MFC to propose granting the species “gamefish” status in Florida, meaning that commercial harvest of the species would be prohibited. Through the surge in popularity of blackened redfish, *S. ocellatus* had become a relatively high-priced, nationally desired species, the harvest of which helped compensate for the lower, year-round prices Florida’s inshore commercial fishermen received for mullet. Because their catch had comprised only one-eighth of the total landings, Florida’s commercial fishing interests viewed the effort to eliminate their harvest of the species as a biased allocation in favor of sport-fishing. A Division of Administrative Hearings (DOAH) officer agreed, declaring in a 1986 ruling that banning commercial harvest would be discriminatory and that, rather than helping to conserve the species, “gamefish” status would allow “recreational fishermen who are already taking as much as seven-eights of the total catch…[to] have all the redfish taken from state waters.” The Florida Conservation Association (FCA), a non-profit organization formed in the 1980s with the goal of “conserving and protecting” the state’s marine resources, appealed the DOAH ruling. Their appeals were upheld by the District Court of Appeals and, ultimately, the Florida Supreme Court. During a hearing that was packed with both FCA supporters and commercial fishing interests, the Governor and Cabinet approved “gamefish” status for redfish in December 1988.468

The redfish ruling raised the political stature of the FCA, helping it become “the primary governmental policy lobbying group for recreational fishermen” in Florida. The organization’s promotion of eliminating the commercial harvest of redfish was based on the belief that selling “wildlife that is harvested from the ‘common pool’ ” is unacceptable because putting “a price on a wild animal…will drive that animal into extinction.” Although they frequently highlighted the enormous financial contributions made by the recreational fishing industry to the state’s economy, the FCA’s leadership did not perceive sport-fishing and other leisure-oriented maritime activities as part of the commercialization process that put particular organisms or entire marine ecosystems at risk. Similar philosophies—that commercial fishing in particular and not catching fish per se was uniquely damaging to the marine environment—demonstrated growing influence in many coastal states. The FCA’s predecessor organization, the Texas-based Gulf Coast Conservation Association (GCCA), had succeeded in convincing the state legislature to ban commercial fishing for redfish in 1981 and outlaw near-shore gill nets seven years later. Through a 1990 ballot proposition, the use of gill nets in Southern California waters was banned starting in 1994, per an amendment to the state’s constitution. Georgia, South Carolina, New York, and several states bordering the Great Lakes also have banned the use of gill nets in waters within their jurisdiction.469 This trend marked the ascendancy of the belief that had emerged in late-nineteenth century Florida and other sites of coastal (October 11, 1986): “recreational fishermen who are already taking…” 24. Barnes, “Save Our Sealife or Save Our Seafood?”: FCA’s goal of “conserving and protecting,” 71.
recreation: that harvesting fish for the marketplace en masse using nets was inherently destructive in a way that anglers wielding lines and hooks were not, no matter how many of the latter occupied the state’s waterways.

Letting the Public Decide

The success of their redfish activism, combined with the political accomplishments of the GCCA in Texas, convinced some in Florida’s recreational fishing organizations that a movement to outlaw commercial gill-netting in the state was feasible. In the forefront of this campaign was Karl Wickstrom, editor and publisher of the Florida Sportsman. A monthly magazine “dedicated to the millions of residents and visitors that fish in Florida every year,” Wickstrom’s publication features articles, fishing tips, glossy photographs, and advertisements for recreational fishing businesses. After the success of California’s ballot proposition to ban gill nets, Wickstrom began pressuring FCA’s inner circle to “shift to a net ban constitutional amendment strategy.” According to Wickstrom, Florida’s fisheries regulatory institutions were overly swayed by commercial interests, were not moving quickly enough to protect the state’s dwindling resources, and would only pass limited regulations rather than the more sweeping measures he believed were called for. Both Wickstrom and Ted Forsgren, executive director of the FCA, were convinced that inshore species had declined in Florida’s inshore waters and that insufficient fish were available to satisfy commercial and recreational interests alike. Echoing the sport-fishing campaigns to ban commercial net-fishing that Shell Fish Commissioner J. Asakiah Williams had referred to seven decades previously, the solution Wickstrom proposed was to “remove the large volume harvester from the mix,” which would create the abundance of inshore species necessary to create satisfying sport-fishing experiences.470

470 For Florida Sportsman’s dedication “to the millions of residents and visitors that fish in Florida every year,” see “Company Overview”: https://www.facebook.com/FloridaSportsman/info. Smith, “The Case of the Commercial Fisheries:” “shift to a net ban,” 154; “remove the large volume harvester,” 151-152. For Wickstrom and Forsgren’s involvement in the SOS campaign, see also Barnes, “Save Our Sealife or Save Our Seafood?”
While the FMRI and the MFC were immersed in the process of collecting data, proposing regulations, and parleying over commercial fishing lobbyists’ objections to restrictions on harvesting, Wickstrom moved forward with the idea of putting the question of outlawing gill nets up for public vote. Many scientists were wary about the ballot initiative campaign, reluctant to transfer the locus of marine resource management from professionals to “the hands of a relatively uninformed, misinformed, and untrained public.” Robert Muller, a research scientist with FMRI’s stock assessment group, suggested that the input of state scientists and managers, along with the contributions of the general public through the public hearing process, provided useful “checks and balances” that would be absent from a “total ban.” Similarly, Brent Winner, associate research scientist with the state’s Fisheries Independent Monitoring Program, stated that while there was a great deal of popular support for the ban, there was “little support based on existing scientific data at the time.”

According to Wickstrom, however, opposition “to the idea of the net ban” on the part of the DNR’s fish biologists, “when they should have been calling for it,” was indication that the public needed to take action.

Along with his FCA supporters and much of the readership of the *Florida Sportsman*, Wickstrom was convinced that commercial gill-netting was responsible for a number of environmental problems, including overfishing of mullet and other species, high levels of by-catch of non-targeted species, and incidental catch of sea turtles and marine mammals such as manatees and dolphins. State and federal officials were concerned, for example, about significant numbers of sea turtle carcasses washing up on

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471 Barnes, “Save Our Sealife or Save Our Seafood?” 80. The quote, “the hands of a relatively uninformed…public,” is Barnes’ summation of the wariness on the part of “many scientists” to support the ballot initiative. Robert Muller’s statement that “managers and public input are more useful than an end run [because] there are none of the checks and balances with a total ban” is from an October 22, 1993 telephone interview with Muller by Barnes: see footnote 50. Brent Winner, Associate Research Scientist (Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, Fish and Wildlife Research Institute, Fisheries Independent Monitoring Program), personal comment, April 26, 2006: “I personally voted against the net limitation law. There was strong public support for this action, however, there was little support based upon existing scientific data at the time.”

472 Smith, “The Case of the Commercial Fisheries,”152, for Wickstrom’s statements on DNR’s biologists’ opposition “to the idea of the net ban…when they should have been calling for it.”
Florida’s beaches, primarily along a particular section of the East Coast, and correlated these mortalities specifically with winter and spring commercial gill netting for Spanish mackerel, pompano, and bluefish in that region. Scientific data linking commercial gill netting with Gulf Coast sea turtle deaths, consistent dolphin or manatee mortalities, and high levels of incidental bycatch were lacking, however.⁴⁷³

Recreational fishing advocates nevertheless were concerned that commercial fishing nets in general “kill all sorts of life besides the intended victims,” as Wickstrom put it. In an April 1991 column, three months after the FMRI had issued its preliminary mullet stock assessment, he submitted the notion of a ballot initiative to ban gill nets to his readers, requesting feedback. The response, he reported in the following column, was overwhelmingly positive. By March 1992, Florida Sportsman and the FCA had formed a political action committee called “Save Our Sealife” (SOS). With Wickstrom as its chair, SOS set about collecting enough signatures to place an initiative on the ballot to prohibit the use of commercial gill nets and other entanglement nets in Florida’s inshore waters.⁴⁷⁴

⁴⁷³ For correlation between East Coast sea turtle strandings and Spanish mackerel, pompano, and bluefish gill-netting, see comments from Barbara Schroeder and Virginia B. Wetherell of Florida’s Department of Environmental Protection in Booth Gunter, “State Officials Say It’s Time to Cut Bait on Gill Netting,” Tampa Tribune, September 12, 1994, Florida/Metro 1. Terry Tomalin, “Proponents Insist Amendment 3 Will Save Dolphins’ Lives,” St. Petersburg Times, October 25, 1994, 4A. For absence of scientific data regarding a connection between commercial gill-netting and dolphin and manatee deaths or bycatch of non-targeted fish, particularly in Florida’s West Coast mullet gill-netting operations, see Terry Tomalin, “Florida’s Fishery: Casting Blame,” St. Petersburg Times, October 25, 1994, 1A, 4A. Kevin Lollar, “Net Results: Outcome Unclear for All But Fishermen,” Ft. Myers News-Press, July 2, 2005, B1, B3. Lollar’s article includes, for example, comments from Randy Wells, director of Mote Marine Laboratory’s Center for Marine Mammal and Sea Turtle Research: “Recreational fishing gear was and is a much bigger problem for [dolphins];” and from Mike Murphy, senior research scientist at the Florida Fish and Wildlife Research Institute: “Whether the ban was necessary is a judgment call. In terms of whether there were stocks of fish that were going to come under peril, I don’t believe it was necessary.” For size selectivity of tended gill nets, and therefore the low incidence of bycatch in Florida’s mullet fishery, especially during spawning season, see Mahmoudi, interview by the author.

⁴⁷⁴ Wickstrom’s comments about commercial nets killing “all sorts of life” are from an article published the day before the November 1994 election: Brian Edwards, “Net Ban Opponents Blast Ad,” Tampa Tribune, November 7, 1994, Florida/Metro 1. Wickstrom’s April 1991 published suggestion for a ballot initiative to ban gill nets is from Smith, “The
The MFC, meanwhile, continued its efforts to develop stricter fishing regulations that would nevertheless allow the harvesting of mullet to continue. Having reviewed the existing rules and stock status and determined that the species was not recovering sufficiently, the Commission convened a panel of independent scientists in 1992 to analyze the biological data collected thus far. On the basis of that review, the MFC ultimately imposed an emergency ruling, which ordered rolling, one-week closures during spawning season, with an additional ten-day closure at the end of the season.

Critiquing the scientific analysis and the impact these regulations would have on fishing businesses and families, the commercial industry continued to object to the structure of MFC’s regulatory proposals. After the Governor and Cabinet refused to accept them, the emergency regulations were submitted in September 1992 to the DOAH, which ruled in favor of the MFC nine months later.

By August 1993, new mullet regulations were imposed, which included limits on the length of gill nets (six hundred yards), pre-spawning season harvest limits for fishermen, extended weekend closures from July through January (noon, Friday through noon, Monday), and a ten-day closure at the end of spawning season. Under these fishing restrictions, the 35 percent SPR goal was expected to be reached within five to seven years. Assuming their modeling inputs were correct, FMRI’s chief mullet biologist noted, the institution “projected that the population of mullet would recover” with the implementation of the new regulations. Another FMRI researcher, in an article published ten years after the ban on gill nets was implemented, stated that because of the regulations that were implemented beginning in 1989, depleted mullet stocks were in the process of recovering before the nets were outlawed.475

475 Marston and Nelson, “New Directions,” 41-43. Leard et al., The Striped Mullet Fishery, five to seven year recovery projection: 9-3. Mahmoudi, “Status and Trends, 2000,” details of 1993 regulations, 12. Mahmoudi, interview by the author: “projected that the population of mullet would recover.” Statements from research scientist Mike Murphy of FMRI are in Lollar, “Net Results,” B3: “Mullet were overfished, but they were recovering under the regulations put in place in the 1980s…There had been a ratcheting down of the commercial fishery, and we were getting to a point where mullet were going to recover to a safe level. When the net ban came in, they recovered much more rapidly.”
Accepted by the commercial industry and approved by the Governor and Cabinet, the 1993 regulations were a considerable accomplishment, considering the history of managing mullet-fishing in Florida. For decades, scientists and managers on the state and federal level had promoted increased harvesting and marketing of Florida’s “underutilized” species. Within two years after the first comprehensive scientific assessment of the species’ status, serious restrictions on the harvest of mullet were implemented. Though many independent commercial fishermen objected to the stringency of the regulations, during the announcement of the final ruling in Tallahassee, Jerry Sansom, the director of OFF, declared to Governor Lawton Chiles and the Cabinet, “We stand here today telling you we can live with this rule.” For sport-fishing activists, however, the regulatory process was moving too slowly and the restrictions were too permissive. Unfolding circumstances did not permit enough time to pass for the new regulations to demonstrate their full effects.

While the mullet-harvesting restrictions were being developed and negotiated, the SOS campaign to place a “net ban” initiative on the ballot for the November 1994 elections continued to gain momentum, with strategic support from several sectors. Florida’s leading conservation and recreational fishing organizations—including the Florida Wildlife Federation, the Tropical Audubon Society, the Florida League of Anglers, and the Coalition of Fishing Clubs—endorsed the campaign. With FCA encouragement, in 1992 Representative R. Z. Safley of Dunedin and Senator Robert M. Johnson of Sarasota—both from coastal regions dense with recreational fishing businesses and activities—introduced bills proposing limitations on gill nets to the state legislature. Killed in committee—as the FCA and the sponsors suspected they would, given the ongoing MFC efforts to develop effective mullet regulations—the failed bills were used as evidence to demonstrate that “existing government mechanisms, both legislative and executive (MFC), were not adequate to address the problem of commercial over-fishing.” This strategy helped FCA and SOS gain support from statewide editorial boards, overcoming their initial reluctance to place scientifically dependent policy matters in the hands of the general public. On the heels of the failed

legislation, all of Florida’s leading newspapers, with the exception of the *Tampa Tribune*, officially endorsed the campaign for a ballot initiative.477

The “net ban” proposal sailed easily through the state’s approval process, with the backing of prominent figures such as sport-fishing advocate General Norman Schwartzkopf, editorial endorsements, and frequent articles in the *Florida Sportsman* and the outdoor columns of state newspapers. By July 1994, SOS volunteers collected about 540,000 signatures, well over the 429,428 that the state required to place a constitutional amendment up for public vote.478 Titled “Limiting Marine Net Fishing,” the proposed amendment stated that the rationale for banning the use of all “gill or other entangling nets” from Florida waters was that:

The marine resources of the State of Florida belong to all of the people of the state and should be conserved and managed for the benefit of the state, its people, and future generations. To this end the people hereby enact limitations on marine net fishing in Florida waters to protect saltwater finfish, shellfish, and other marine animals from unnecessary killing, overfishing and waste.

After commercial fishing interests failed to pose a legal challenge to this language, despite having arguable grounds to do so, Florida’s Supreme Court approved the placement of the proposition on the ballot.479

477 Barnes, “Save Or Sealife or Save Our Seafood?”; list of conservation and recreational fishing organizations’ endorsements, 78; details about Safley’s and Johnson’s bills, 73. Smith, “The Case of the Commercial Fisheries:” for Forsgren’s awareness that the legislation would not pass and, in its failure, help convince editorial boards and the public that “existing government mechanisms, both legislative and executive (MFC), were not adequate…” and for list of newspapers in support of the ballot initiative, see 157-158; see also 129-130.


479 For the language of the proposed constitutional amendment, see Barnes, “Save Or Sealife or Save Our Seafood?,” 88. See also Constitution of the State of Florida, Article X, Section 16, “Limiting marine net fishing;” http://www.flsenate.gov/Laws/Constitution#A10S16. For the argument that commercial fishing industry organizations failed to avail themselves of legitimate legal grounds for opposing the subject matter and language of the proposed amendment, see William L.
Mullet-Fishing, Banning Nets, and the Public Good

Many of the tensions that had been present in Florida’s inshore fisheries since the beginning of American presence in the region were implicit in the ballot initiative campaign. Echoing the territorial 1832 fisheries protection bill, the language of the “net ban” defined entitlement to Florida’s marine resources in terms of residency within the state. As described in the first chapter, the 1832 bill had stipulated that because property rights to the fisheries resided “exclusively in the people of Florida,” any regulation of these resources was intended for the “exclusive benefit of the inhabitants” of the territory.480 While the territorial legislators had used such terminology to assert a definition of local citizenship circumscribed by ethnicity, the language of the net limitation amendment suggested a sense of entitlement based on distance from commercial harvest of marine resources. Since mullet consistently had been the dominant finfish harvested commercially in inshore waters, and since gill nets were the primary and most effective way to catch the herbivorous species, the ballot initiative essentially defined the process of catching mullet for the marketplace as an act of “unnecessary killing, overfishing, and waste.”481 During the months preceding the election, arguments in support of and against this supposition formed a significant component of the debate over the merits of the proposed amendment.

480 Statement of John P. Booth, Chairman of the Committee on the State of Territory, to the Legislative Council of Florida, February 8, 1832, H. Doc., No. 201-22 at 3-6.
The most vocal proponents of the ban on gill nets were explicit about the expendability of mullet as a food, the commercial absence of which they considered to be no great loss. Dismissing both the cultural significance of mullet as an affordable food fish and the autonomous choices of its consumers, Karl Wickstrom asserted that chicken and catfish were equally cheap sources of protein, which low-income consumers could easily purchase as substitutes for the Florida fish. More generally, he reasoned, seafood consumption in the United States since World War II had been driven predominantly by increasing populations of Asians and Hispanics, for whom fish tended to have greater dietary significance than it did for European Americans. To fill this demand, “imports and northern fish” were readily available, making the commercial fishing performed by “old Florida families” largely irrelevant, Wickstrom argued. The outdoor writer for the *Gainesville Sun*, Richard Bowles, claimed that there was an undesirable, “third world aspect” to harvesting a low-cost forage fish like mullet, for which the producer “makes a pittance,” while risking ecological damage. More attention, he suggested, should be paid to the “strong recreational fishing heritage that directly affects all Florida citizens,” rather than exclusively focusing on the heritage of commercial fishing.

Opponents of the ban on gill nets, on the other hand, highlighted the rights of Florida’s citizens to access the state’s marine resources through the marketplace. This viewpoint emphasized the importance of mullet and croaker (another net-caught species) to low-income and African American consumers in particular, an approach that one analyst described as an ineffectual attempt to “play the race card.” On February 25, 1993, the Florida Conference of Black Legislators (FCBL) passed a resolution in opposition to the proposed amendment because it would deprive “minority and low-income citizens…of a low-cost…traditional and culturally important seafood from their state waters.” The FCBL resolution also decried the negative impact a ban on gill nets would have on “small and minority businesses” and on Florida’s “more economically deprived

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482 Smith, “The Case of the Commercial Fisheries:” Wickstrom’s suggestion that chicken and catfish were “readily available substitute[s] for mullet for “low income individuals,” 149; Wickstrom’s argument that “imports and northern fish” rather than fishing performed by “old Florida families” meet the seafood demands of Asians and Hispanics, 144. The “third world aspect” of mullet-fishing and Florida’s “strong recreational fishing heritage” is in Richard Bowles, “A Plea From the Final Edition: Save Our Fisheries,” *Gainesville Sun*, June 25, 1993, 3C.
neighborhoods and areas.” For similar reasons, the state chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People also opposed the ban.\textsuperscript{483}

Another African American group, the Rainbow Coalition of Seafood Consumers of Florida (hereafter, Rainbow Coalition), likewise defended the rights of citizens of the state to obtain commercially harvested seafood through the marketplace. The president of the group, the Reverend Barry Powell of Jacksonville, expressed the Rainbow Coalition’s opposition to attempts to “deny us, the consumer, continuous access to the fresh mullet, which we love—especially the minorities.” In a letter to the editor of a Sarasota newspaper, Johnny Johnson, a member of the NAACP as well as the Rainbow Coalition, wrote that the vast majority of black Floridians did not fish recreationally. Rather, the seafood that formed a significant part of their diet was caught by the state’s commercial gill-netters and purchased at seafood markets. Instead of high-cost domestic species such as red snapper and grouper or “expensive imported fish,” he noted, black people bought and ate “mullet…and other inexpensive finfish.” The rationale for the Rainbow Coalition’s opposition to the ballot initiative, Johnson concluded, was “to defeat this deadly attack to deny us equal access to Florida’s inexpensive finfish, a constitutional and God-given right.” Contravening the implications of the proposed amendment, Johnson and other “invisible users” of the state’s marine resources positioned themselves as legitimate members of the body politic while positioning the act of commercial fishing as a benefit to the state and its people.\textsuperscript{484}

The defense of the rights of mullet consumers contained class as well as racial dimensions. At the start of the SOS campaign, Bob Jones, the executive director of the

\textsuperscript{483} Smith, “The Case of the Commercial Fisheries:” opposition to the net ban based on the importance of mullet to African American consumers as an “attempt to play the race card,” 112; FCBL resolution regarding “minority and low-income citizens…” 111. FCBL statement regarding “small and minority businesses” and NAACP opposition to the ban is in Barnes, “Save Our Sealife or Save Our Seafood,” 79.

\textsuperscript{484} Rev. Powell’s statement is in: “Chiles, Cabinet OK Mullet Rule.” Johnny Johnson, Letter to the Editor: “Racism Behind Proposed Net Ban,” \textit{Sarasota Herald-Tribune}, December 13, 1993, 8A. See Lampl, “Fishery Allocation,” 101: “Fishery allocation issues generally focus on the most visible users: sport fishermen, who use the resource for pleasure, and commercial fishermen, who use the resource for profit. Such an approach to divvying up the fish ignores the ‘invisible’ users, such as the non-fishing consumers, who depend on commercial fishermen for market access to the common resource.”
Southeastern Fisheries Association, a commercial seafood trade group based in Tallahassee, charged that “class struggle” rather than legitimate biological concerns were at the heart of the effort to ban gill nets. Likewise, a flyer issued by the Rainbow Coalition emphasized that “Florida’s minorities,” especially blacks and Hispanics, purchased and consumed 75 percent of the net-caught fish in the state while describing the sport-fishing supporters of the ban as hypocritical, “greedy playboys” who were the true “destroyers of our sealife.” In August 1994, the group displayed a poster against the ballot initiative titled “Sorry, Charlie,” which accused then-State Senator Charlie Crist of elitist motives in supporting the ban and thereby favoring wealthy recreational fishing interests versus commercial-cum-populist access to marine fish populations.485

In response to critiques of class bias, SOS supporters positioned recreational use of marine resources and ecosystems as both environmentally benign and economically central, in contrast to the mass harvesting of fish with nets. Crist used the publicity surrounding the poster as a platform to display his environmentalist credentials, stating in response: “Our precious resources are too important for us not to ban the nets…Our environment and the tourism that it brings is too important. We have to ban the nets and save our sea life.” In a Gainesville Sun column, Richard Bowles noted that sport-fisheries were five to ten times more valuable to the state than the commercial fishing industry. Similarly, an SOS flyer listed the increased manufacturing of recreational boats, motors, gear and coastal resorts as among the benefits a ban on gill nets would generate. In a report submitted to the FCA, economist Robert Ditton stated that the much greater economic value of Florida’s sport fisheries justified “a reallocation of common property resources to the public for recreational and tourism purposes.” While highlighting the revenue-generating nature of the sport-fishing industry, Ditton and other supporters of the

ban on gill nets asserted that the practice of recreational angling, unlike commercial use of nets, intrinsically conformed to sound conservation principles.\textsuperscript{486}

Implicitly, the economic justifications for outlawing gill nets privileged access to the collective marine resources of the state by those with the time and financial resources to engage in what are often costly recreational activities. As had been the case with the 1988 “gamefish” ruling for redfish, this contention served to present the maritime recreational industry as “a form of ‘unlimited good’…[which] depends on a form of unlimited entry” into the leisure-oriented seascape.\textsuperscript{487} At the same time, it demoted the rights of consumers and the value of food-producing waterways as an element of the public good. According to the language of the ballot initiative, Florida’s marine resources belonged to all of the people of the state and should be managed for the benefit of “the state, its people, and future generations.” This policy, thus, placed those who interacted with marine ecosystems primarily through selling and buying seafood outside the circle of belonging to the state. The net ban initiative, in other words, served not only to reallocate the space and resources of the state’s inshore marine systems, but to reinforce social hierarchies as well.

While devaluing the social worth of Florida’s inshore waters as systems for local food production, SOS supporters also critiqued the use of mullet roe harvested in the state as food for foreign—and especially Asian—consumers. In the \textit{Tampa Tribune}, for example, outdoor writer Frank Sargeant wrote in a sequence of columns: “The nets also capture millions of pounds of mullet each year, primarily so eggs can be sold in the Far East”; “…the eggs [are] shipped as high-priced premium items to the Orient”; and “…it’s sure that putting those billions of mullet eggs into our waters rather than on the plates of diners in the Orient will have a tremendous effect on our gamefish populations.” In part,
the accentuation of “Far Eastern” and “Oriental” markets for mullet roe had the effect of distancing the presumably grassroots nature of the ballot initiative campaign from the suspiciously exotic special interests that were alleged to dominate the opposition.\footnote{Frank Sargeant quotes are from these columns, respectively: “Group Prepares Campaign: Organizers Plan Fundraiser to Increase Awareness of Amendment That Would Ban Net Fishing,” \textit{The Tampa Tribune}, September 7, 1994, Sports 8. “Parties, Prizes Fill Outdoors Calendar,” \textit{The Tampa Tribune}, September 28, 1994, Sports 8. “Net Ban Vote Will Send Clear Message,” \textit{The Tampa Tribune}, November 6, 1994, Sports 14.}

One dimension of this rhetorical strategy emphasized the potential of wealthy foreign seafood wholesalers to fund the opposition to the gill net ban. An article in the Florida/Metro section of the \textit{Tampa Times}, for example, detailed the financial contributions made by Florida-based, Taiwanese-owned mullet roe export companies, several of which had bought out local seafood wholesalers in the 1980s to develop this market. The article noted that the roe exporters were concerned about “the demise of the lucrative Florida roe business” and that three of these companies collectively donated about $130,000 to the campaign against the proposed amendment, which was over 75 percent of the total amount raised by commercial fishing interests by July 1994. Quoted in the article is SOS campaign director Bill Coletti, who expressed concern about the possibility that the export companies would pump millions of dollars into the campaign against the ballot initiative: “Those guys have the potential to write a $3 million check…Any media consultant in the state will tell you $3 million buys a whole lot of TV.” Contrasting the vested interests of commercial fishing businesses with the altruistic motivations of supporters of the ban, the \textit{Gainesville Sun’s} outdoor writer likewise expressed suspicions about nondomestic influence within the campaign’s opposition. “That Taiwanese money is now returning to Florida, in foreign contributions to fight passage of Amendment 3,” he wrote, adding, “Virtually every letter opposing Amendment 3 is written by someone who has a financial stake in selling the public’s fish.” The underlying premise of the SOS ballot initiative campaign was that recreational fishing interests were grassroots, locally based advocates of fishery protection, untainted...
by ulterior motives, in contrast to the vested, geographically dispersed interests of the commercial fishing industry and seafood wholesalers.  

What the text of these articles did not emphasize is that the SOS campaign—promoted and funded to a large extent by individuals deeply involved in the business of marine recreation—vastly outspent the commercial fishing industry’s opposition efforts. A chart at the end of the *Tampa Tribune* article delineated the overall financing of both sides of the issue. By July 1994, proponents of the net limitation had raised 468% more funds than had opponents: $963,335 compared to the commercial fishing interests’ $169,739. By the end of the campaign, SOS had expended about $1.3 million in their successful drive to ban gill nets. Having donated $50,000, the largest individual contributor to the ballot initiative campaign was *Florida Sportsman* editor and publisher, Karl Wickstrom. Other industry affiliates that pledged financial and organizational support for general efforts to ban commercial gill nets throughout the nation’s coastal states included the National Marine Manufacturers Association and the American Sportfishing Association, trade groups for suppliers of recreational fishing gear and infrastructure. 

A second dimension of the emphasis supporters of the gill net ban placed on the foreignness of the roe market was the use of Orientalist tropes about Asian people and society to cast the commercialization of mullet eggs in a suspicious light. Wickstrom, for example, evoked a sense of commercially tainted sexual transgression when he described the mullet roe industry as “a gold rush mentality…These are unborn eggs that are hurried off to the Orient and sold at a tremendous price, not as food, per se, but as a fancy condiment.” In a letter to the *Tampa Tribune*, Gene Turner, the president of the Florida

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490 Gunter, “Battle Lines.” Gunter, “Amendment Issues.” Financial contribution “termination reports” for the political action committees in support of and opposed to the ballot initiative should have been filed and stored with the State Archives of Florida, but as of this writing they have yet to be located; personal communication from Joel Mynard, Division of Elections, Florida Department of State, August 14, 2013. Support for bans on commercial gill-netting from recreational industry trade groups is in Tom Meade, “Commercial Gill-Netting is Targeted for Elimination,” *Providence Journal-Bulletin*, September 3, 1995, Sports D10.
League of Anglers, also raised doubts about the transformation of domestic mullet into food for foreigners: “The roe, of course, are shipped to the Orient, where they are supposed to aid in creating more Orientals instead of mullet.” For many recreational fishing advocates, the conversion of mullet into a luxury commodity for Asian consumers undermined the species’ critical function of mullet as a food for desirable game-fish in Florida waters.\textsuperscript{491}

Echoing the rhetoric of the anti-abortion movement, these arguments relied on Western tropes regarding the deviant, sexual excess presumed to be characteristic of “Oriental” culture: decent, hometown mullet were being stymied in their attempt to be fruitful and multiply as they are ordained to do. Mullet was portrayed as an innocent victim whose “unborn eggs” were being shanghaied off to “the Orient,” with foreign entities profiting from, and proliferating through, this unwholesome trade.\textsuperscript{492}

Compounding the problem, Florida’s most humble species was being gussied up as a “fancy condiment” rather than playing its proper domestic role as food for poor, U.S. folk or other fish to eat, or as bait for wealthier folk to catch higher-class fish. For supporters of the gill net ban, mullet might have been widely considered to be an expendable trash fish, but they did embrace the species, finally, as American trash.

When the election date came, November 8, 1994, “Amendment 3: Limiting Marine Net Fishing” passed overwhelmingly, with over 2.8 million voters, about 72 percent of the voting public, in favor. As of July 1, 1995, the ban on commercial gill nets and other entanglement nets in Florida waters has been enshrined as Article X, Section 16 of the state’s constitution. Supporters of the ballot initiative hailed the decision as a boon for marine resources and recreational fishing. On the day after the election, Tampa FCA leader Richard Seward proclaimed the election victory to be “the greatest day we’ll ever see for the future of Florida fishing,” while Karl Wickstrom described it as “a landmark turn toward conservation that’s going to produce benefits for generations to come.”


Although the state’s fishery biologists emphasize that the effects of the policy on populations of fish targeted by recreationally fishing folk are difficult to separate from myriad other factors, Wickstrom and other sport-fishing advocates insist that the ban on gill nets has had “spectacular” results.\footnote{Election results in Barnes, “Save Our Sealife or Save Our Seafood,” 81. Seward quoted in Frank Sargeant, “State Voters Reclaim Fish Management,” \textit{Tampa Tribune}, November 9, 1994, Sports 1. Wickstrom: “a landmark turn…” is in Gunter, “Amendment Issues Win Big Support.” His comments about the “spectacular” success of the net ban is in Lollar, “Net Results,” B1. In Lollar, “Net Results,” B3, several scientists comment on the difficulty in scientifically establishing whether the ban on gill nets has resulted in a healthier recreational fishery. According to FMRI’s Mike Murphy, “It’s a gray area. We can’t see in black and white the effects of the net ban on anything but how it affected the commercial industry. How it affects the recreational fishery and fish populations is a complex series of interacting features.” Steve Bortone, director of the Sanibel-Captiva Conservation Foundation Marine Laboratory, stated, “The net ban hasn’t had as great an impact as people think,” noting that recreational fishing exerted much heavier pressure on spotted seatrout populations than commercial harvesting, for example. FMRI’s Joe O’Hop noted that regulations on the recreational fishery for seatrout were a significant factor in the species’ recovery. In a meeting with the author on August 24, 2004, several FMRI scientists (Steve Brown, Richard Cody, Mike Murphy, Joe O’Hop, and Beverly Sauls) likewise emphasized that because of the number of “confounding effects” at work in the marine environment, attributing causality to a single factor, such as the ban on gill nets, is hard to do.} 

Commercial fishing interests, unsurprisingly, were and continue to be dismayed by the outcome. OFF Director Jerry Sansom declared that the ballot initiative campaign was a “high-tech media lynching,” fueled by lies and propaganda. Alluding to the racist rampage that led to the murder of at least eight African Americans and the razing of a black community in Levy County in 1923, Sansom called the ban on gill nets the “greatest injustice committed against a group of Floridians since the Rosewood massacre.” Explaining why he agreed with Sansom’s dramatic metaphor, Charlie Wilson, a white commercial fisherman from Tampa, said, “What they did is inexcusable, for Americans to do that to other Americans…They took [inshore fishermen] that had no power and eliminated ’em.” Wilson evoked the same sense of commonweal between commercial fishermen, marine systems, and the common people as that expressed by Pine Island fishing folk, adding, “I always figured I was doing an honorable thing by
feeding people." If net ban proponents perceived mullet as a trash fish, Florida’s inshore commercial fishing folk recognized in the wake of the initiative that they, as intermediaries between the species and the public, widely were viewed as a human species of American trash.

CONCLUSION
THE GREENING OF WHITE PRIVILEGE

While the campaign to ban gill nets was promoted on the basis of conservation rhetoric, its underlying effects were to advance the utilitarian understandings of the seascape that had long underwritten the process of Americanizing Florida. In the late nineteenth century, a primary public use of Florida’s waterways in service to the nation was to generate revenue through extractive commercial harvesting. By the end of the following century, recreational and aesthetic endeavors had become the preferred modes of interaction with marine space. Rather than predominantly serving as a site for producing individual species with which to supply commercial networks, Florida’s inshore seascapes became more valuable as sources of scenic capital, productive of leisure opportunities rather than marketable food. As its promoters stated, one outcome anticipated by the ballot initiative was the expansion of maritime recreational industries.

Seemingly opposed, both ends of the spectrum—the valuation of marine systems as a space for capitalist extraction, on the one hand, and as a site of leisure on the other—define the highest good as that which generates the highest value. Legitimate concerns about the status of mullet stocks and the health of Florida’s marine systems were at play during the period of the ballot initiative campaign and no doubt occupied the minds and hearts of many supporters of the ban. At the same time, conservation rhetoric helped mask ideological and material investments in the seascape as a domain dedicated to recreation-oriented commerce. In the process of constructing a vision of a healthy marine environment as one that is free of commercial harvesting, other marine enterprises—such as increased boating and sport-fishing as well as coastal development for housing and recreation—were construed as benign. By privileging the experiences and priorities of those who produced and consumed leisure rather than food, the constitutional amendment mapped Florida’s inshore marine space as a domain meant to service the social and economic logic of the dominant, white elite.

The guiding hand of instrumentalist philosophies steadily effaced the localized moral economies of those whose lives and labor were enmeshed in the shorelines and inshore waters of Florida’s southwest coasts. As a public policy, the net limitation citizens’ ballot initiative reinforced a dynamic that had been at work from the beginning
of U.S. presence in Florida. Over the course of the nearly five hundred years since Spanish colonization and settlement of the Florida peninsula, mullet provided a social foundation of protein and income and a cultural base of fluidity. The daily-life practices of harvesting, trading, and consuming mullet helped blur boundaries between land and sea, black and white, and petty production and transnational capitalism. Because their production systems, household structures, and ethno-racial ambiguity failed to conform to centralized ideals of citizenship, the diverse array of people who harvested, purchased, and consumed mullet were marked as socially inferior by members of the scientific and political establishment and placed outside the rubric of full belonging to the American project. The late twentieth century ban on gill nets is an example of this dynamic as much as the razing of the early nineteenth century mullet ranchos and the removal of their Spanish Indian populations.

Diminished in these processes were cultural worlds that had adapted to particular biological and physical spaces, adaptations that were facilitated by the body of an abundant, herbivorous fish. Mullet exerted this influence not through its condition as a biological creature but, rather, through its role as a humble, regional commodity. Being wild and marine, the species’ growth and abundance cannot be manipulated or well predicted to the extent that domestic animals and plants can. And yet, as an inshore species that lives mostly in shallow water habitats, mullet has been accessible for thousands of years to the successive human populations that have accommodated themselves to life within the challenging environmental conditions of southwest Florida.

The transformation of this animal into a marketed food and source of income produced and reinforced long-term relationships between people and particular environmental systems, helping to sustain what anthropologist Sidney Mintz refers to as “the animal reality of our existence.” Through time, place-specific customs related to the production and consumption of mullet also contributed to the development of collective identities along Florida’s Gulf Coast. The everyday lives and economic systems that harvesting and eating mullet fostered in specific locales supported a cultural interface between sea and land within which mullet and other species could thrive. While

the immersive labor of mullet-fishing involved the extraction of many millions of pounds of fish over the centuries, it did not require extensive shoreline development or modifications of the habitats these species need in order to reproduce. Opposition to the ban on gill nets on the part of Florida’s inshore commercial fishing families represented a defense not only of their means of earning a living but also of a life-world based on patterns of dependency between producers, consumers, and mullet and its ecosystems. For net ban opponents, perhaps more disturbing than the loss of income was the dismantling of this commonweal by those who little understood or appreciated it.

In the aftermath of the ban on gill nets, commercial fishing for mullet in Florida did not end. Fishermen legally may use cast nets and certain other non-entangling nets to harvest fish. The post-1995 legal gears are much more physically demanding, technically challenging, and less efficient to operate, however, thus excluding many long-term fishing folk who had never imagined not being engaged in the profession. Consequently, the number of commercial fishermen and the volume of harvests dropped sharply after the net ban. Between 1992 and 1998, about three thousand commercial fishermen in Florida left the industry, with almost three thousand more dropping out by 2003. In 1993, almost twenty million pounds of striped mullet were harvested in Florida; in 1996, nearly six million pounds were harvested, a decrease of about 72 percent. Average dockside prices increased during this period—from fifty-seven cents to seventy-six cents per pound—but overall value declined by almost 50 percent: from about ten million dollars to about five million dollars.496

In popular media, many analysts view these trends as a success and, without attention to the tension between scientific and popular approaches to assessing and regulating the fishery, interpret the ban on gill nets as a necessary measure to halt drastic declines in the population of mullet in Florida. Others are heartened by the continued

496 According to data supplied by FMRI scientists, between 1992 and 1994, the number of Florida commercial fishermen reporting landings was 14,120; between 1996 and 1998, the number was 11,088; by 2003, the number was 8,168 (these figures do not disaggregate those who targeted mullet per se), email communication to the author from Joe O’Hop and Robert Muller, July 22, 2004. Landings and price data are from National Marine Fisheries Service statistics, supplied by FMRI’s Behzad Mahmoudi. See also Smith, Jacob, Jepson and Israel, “After the Florida Net Ban.” Adams, Jacob, and Smith, “What Happened After the Net Ban?”
production of mullet in the state. Since 1996, commercial landings have increased: between 1997 and 2010, Florida fishermen annually harvested an average of about eight and half million pounds of mullet. Landings appear to be concentrated within roe season, when profits can be maximized. While many former commercial fishermen have left the profession, some new fishermen have entered. New markets also have developed, including the domestic production of bottarga by a Cortez fish company: from spawning, female fish harvested with cast nets, mullet roe is carefully extracted, salted, pressed, and sun-dried, retailing for 42 dollars for three ounces (or 224 dollars per pound). Mullet, some suggest, could be the “next hot fish.” The development of a new, scaled-down fishery employing hand-thrown nets and productive of an artisanal product based on a quintessentially local fish is, for some, evidence of a triumph of sustainability.497

Such conclusions beg the question of what is being sustained. Outlawing gill nets clearly has reduced the number of commercial fishermen in the state’s inshore waters and leaves more mullet in the water to reproduce and to provide food for other species. At the same time, the ban on gill nets has decreased the volume of mullet harvested annually and, therefore, the overall availability of mullet as food in wholesale and retail markets. The emergence of a luxury market for mullet roe geared toward high-end retailers, restaurants, and individual epicures demonstrates that, in addition to sustaining larger populations of mullet in the ecosystem, what also has been sustained is the centuries-old vision of the great capitalist potential of Florida’s most abundant food fish. This vision depends on the subordination of the cultural worlds historically produced through the social body of mullet in southwest Florida. Compromised, though not entirely lost,

through the realization of the capitalist potential of mullet is the supply of an affordable, healthy, local fish for low-income people and people of color. The citizen initiative that placed a permanent ban on gill nets in the constitution of the state of Florida undermined the viability of a long-term food system in the South, the social and cultural characteristics of which operated within the interstices of capitalism and, to some extent, posed alternatives to the region’s racial, ethnic, class, and gender hierarchies. To understand Florida’s ban on gill nets as a victory for environmental conservation, thus, is to position efforts to create sustainable, “green” economies and local-food cultures as a new shade of white privilege.
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