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NEWS

UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA: The beginning of a university

1890-1910

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Juan Ponce de Leon may have come to Florida in search of the legendary Fountain of Youth, but it was more than three centuries later that Gainesville Mayor W.H. Thomas actually found a way to link water to perpetual youthfulness.

It was Thomas' promise to give the University of Florida free water forever, after all, that brought UF to Gainesville in 1906.

"Without Major Thomas' offer of free water there is simply no way the University of Florida would have ended up in Gainesville," said retired UF history Sam Proctor, UF's official historian. "That one idea changed everything."

At the time of Thomas' inspired offer, half a dozen communities were actively competing to become home to the state's first public university. Some were bigger. Some had been around longer. Some had better amenities. Some had better political connections. Some had a more educated citizenry. All were prepared to offer land and cash.

Tiny Gainesville, with fewer than 4,000 residents, was not considered a favorite.

But Thomas' promise of perpetual water changed history, won UF for Gainesville, and at the dawn of the new millennium makes Gainesville the state's youngest community, defined and redefined each year by thousands of new college students who pour into town on the last leg of their journey to adulthood.

To fully understand the significance of Thomas' notion, and its effects, it is necessary to understand the Gainesville and the Florida of the time.

Florida at the beginning of the 20th century was not a major player on the national scene. Barely 50 years into statehood -- and barely 75 years under United States jurisdiction -- Florida was the South's least populous state, numbering about 500,000 residents.

No cities counted more than 25,000, and the state's economy was primarily agriculture. Tourism, soon to follow behind the railroads of Henry Flagler and Henry Plant, had not yet taken hold.

Neither did the state seem a propitious place for a university.

Harvard University, in Massachusetts, then was more than 250 years old. The University of Georgia, in the state next door, had been graduating students for more than a century. But Florida's few state-assisted educational institutions mostly had been created in the last 20 years of the 19th century. They ranged from glorified grammar schools to high schools offering a few advanced courses for a handful of the most capable students.

Hard-scrabble Floridians, struggling to survive and poised for a future they could not yet imagine, had little history of higher education, and even less vision of it.

The most advanced of the eight state-supported institutions was Florida Agriculture College at Lake City, whose founding there in 1884 was rooted in the federal land grant program authorized under the Morrill Act, which provided states with federal lands that could be sold to finance institutions of higher learning. But in its first 20 years, the college 50 miles north of Gainesville granted fewer than 100 undergraduate degrees.

State leaders and legislators were growing increasingly disenchanted with such meager results, particularly in the face of increasing funding demands by Florida Agricultural College and the other state-funded schools.

Florida, said State Superintendent of Education William Sheets, was "like a poor man with more children than he can provide for, yet each is the object of his special affection."

Not seeing any immediate change in the state's economic circumstances, leaders begin to think about changing the institutions themselves.

Departure from the status quo found a champion in Napoleon Bonaparte Broward, a former Jacksonville sheriff elected governor in 1904 on a promise to consolidate the schools. Following Broward's lead, the 1905 Legislature passed a bill authored by Jacksonville Rep. Henry Holland Buckman, chairman of the House Judiciary Committee, consolidating Florida's eight schools -- including East Florida Seminary in Gainesville.

In the future, the Buckman Act decreed, the state would fund only four institutions: A university for white males, a college for white females, a college for blacks and a school for the physically impaired. Those institutions henceforth would come under the direction of a statewide coordinating body to be known as the Board of Control.

Under the new arrangement, the Institute for the Deaf, Blind and Dumb would be in St. Augustine, and The Florida Normal and Industrial College for Negroes would be in Tallahassee. But it would be up to the state Board of Education and the newly created Board of Control to determine a suitable location for the white women's college and the white men's university.

Buckman realized that the white men's university -- to be called the University of the State of Florida -- would be the most significant accomplishment of the legislation.

That university, he said, in time "will rank with any in the United States."

Tallahassee had little competition in its quest to become permanent host for Florida Female College, because a similar institution already existed there. The Board of Control and Board of Education approved that location by a 10-0 vote.

But the location of the new University of the State of Florida was less certain.

Lake City's Florida Agricultural College, home to the state's federal Morrill Act Land Grant institution, by the terms of the Buckman Act already was being called the University of the State of Florida, and by all rights should have remained where it was. But Jacksonville, then the state's largest city, and home of some of its most powerful politicians, was in the running. With that uncertainty, Gainesville, Fernandina Beach, Live Oak and Ocala all were willing to take a shot at the new university.

Jacksonville was the first choice of Florida Agriculture College for President Andrew Sledd, who held degrees from Harvard and Yale, but he switched his support to Lake City.

South Florida communities were not seriously considered. Most Floridians still lived in the northern part of the state, not in the swampy south. The recently ended Spanish-American War had brought growth to some coastal areas, particularly Tampa and Key West, but the explosive growth that eventually would affect South Florida was still years away.

Board of Control members, appointed in June 1905, soon found themselves subject to intense lobbying by community leaders -- including Thomas, who organized an energetic campaign to convince key decision makers of the wisdom of locating UF in Gainesville. 1905: The State Board of Education and Board of Control vote 6-4 to locate the University of Florida in Gainesville.

One convert was the Tampa Tribune, which editorialized that Gainesville had "everything desirable for the maintenance of the university. It has school spirit, good water, a healthful climate, good buildings (and) is a town without a saloon or disorderly house and with a standard of morality that makes it an ideal college town."

On July 6, 1905, The State Board of Education and Board of Control voted 6-4 to locate the University of Florida in Gainesville.

News of the decision reached Gainesville by telegraph just before midnight, setting off "a display of fireworks and a general love feast and hallelujah," according to that week's Gainesville Sun.

Reported Ocala Star Banner: "Everything that whistled, exploded or resounded was called in the requisition and the hottest time in its history was abroad in the old town."

Thomas, whose name today adorns the city's Thomas Center, became a local hero.

But Gainesville's enthusiasm was not universally shared, particularly among the professoriate who would be expected to move from the then more cosmopolitan Lake City to tiny Gainesville. The image they gleaned of the new campus as construction began down a dirt road a mile west of town did little to assuage their concerns.

"A desolate and forbidding scene," wrote UF vice president James Farr in 1906, after a faculty committee visit from Lake City to Gainesville.

"My heart sank," wrote Farr, "and I wondered, could we ever attract students to this spot, could we ever obtain the large sums to convert this bare spot into a plant commensurate for our ambitions for the future great university. I went back to Lake City feeling chilled and discouraged."

Lake City residents were no less disturbed about the loss of the university. The city filed suit in federal court to try to halt the move, and as the scheduled July 1906 departure date approached some residents darkly threatened violence.

Professor W.S. **Cawthon**, a steady marksman, was put in charge of leading four double team wagons out of town loaded with equipment and supplies to be removed to the new university in Gainesville.

Board of Control Chairman Nathan Bryan, well aware of the sentiment in Lake City, authorized **Cawthon** to hire watchmen to keep Lake City folks at bay.

"If the men are arrested of course you will notify me," Bryan wrote Cawthon from Jacksonville. "At this time it is very necessary that you and the men engaged in shipping this equipment to Gainesville be careful not to offend anybody, nor to get in any argument with any people at Lake City, but attend strictly to business."

In the end, the move went off without arrest, and without violence, though Cawthon kept his rifle close at hand while the wagons passed through sometimes jeering Lake City crowds.

Lake City continued its battle in the courts for more than a year, before finally giving up.

A little more than 100 students registered for classes when President Andrew Sledd, relocated from Lake City, directed UF to open its doors on Sept. 26, 1906. Of those initial 102 students, more than a third were pre-collegiate, taking lower level subjects in preparation for college studies. The first class of students was nearly all from Florida, though one student came from Russia, and one student each came from Alabama, Georgia and South Carolina. Floridians attended tuition-free, paying only a \$5 fee to register. Dorm residence cost \$2.50 a month.

Only two permanent buildings were complete when classes began the next day -- Buckman Hall, named after the author of the Buckman Act, which created the university; and Thomas Hall, named after the Gainesville mayor credited with bringing the university to Gainesville. Thomas Hall housed the state agriculture experiment station, the library, classrooms, an auditorium, laboratories and offices for the president and faculty. Buckman Hall held dorms, a gymnasium and an infirmary.

The university that first year had three departments: Agricultural, mechanical and industrial arts; scientific and classical study; and teacher training. All students took military science and tactics.

But with 68 college men in attendance, UF was beginning to gather the accoutrements of university life. Significant among them was sports, particularly

football.

Limited intercollegiate competition had been introduced at Florida Agricultural College in the late 1890s, first baseball and then football. An athletic association had been formed. Faculty had drafted its first football rules, including a provision excluding faculty from playing on the team.

But until UF arrived in Gainesville, there had been no full-time coach. Now there was one -- J.A. "Pee Wee" Forsythe Jr. Not being a faculty member, Forsythe was allowed to play as well as coach. Behind Forsythe -- and carrying the school's newly adopted orange and blue colors -- UF's football team won its first game in Gainesville, beating private Rollins College 6-0.

UF also launched its first student newspaper -- the University News -- which published weekly, with a special edition on football weekends.

The following year, UF began "Dad's Day," a predecessor to the present Homecoming weekend. A year later, UF's sports mascot -- the alligator -- was launched at the instigation of local merchants who observed the success of stores near the University of Virginia campus hawking mascot-emblazoned items, and discovered no other institution had claimed the 'gator.

Despite its collegiate trappings, UF grew relatively slowly in its first few years -- too slowly for some newly elected members of the Board of Education, who began to pressure the Board of Control to fire President Sledd, who proved disinclined to lower admissions standards in order to increase enrollment.

Some members also may have bristled at Sledd's iconoclasm. Two years before coming to Florida he had resigned from Emory College after raising the hackles of Atlanta power brokers in an article published by The Atlantic Monthly titled, "The Negro: Another View," in which he argued that blacks had the same inalienable rights as whites.

Similar iconoclasm showed itself in the enrollment dispute.

"If my position is to be regarded and dealt with as a political office, if my tenure is to be dependent upon my acquiescence in the application of political methods to the administration of an educational enterprise, my past record and present attitude necessitates my resignation," Sledd wrote.

"If it is demanded that numbers be secured without reference to their fitness for the work, or to the methods adapted for securing them, I am not the man for the place."

The Board of Control supported Sledd, declaring in a public statement that "we have not considered it the part of honesty to undertake to mislead the people of the State by 'padding' enrollment." But they reluctantly accepted his resignation, sending him on his way with UF's first honorary degree. The following year -- still not yet 40 -- he was hired as president of Southern University in Alabama.

The Board of Control then hired Florida Female College president Albert Murphree, also not yet 40, but an apparent favorite of the Board of Education. Murphree in his 18-year tenure would see UF enrollment grow more than tenfold, from 186 to more than 2,000.

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