
Turtles And Turtling On The Florida Frontier

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Research centered on 19th century Florida has focused largely on immigration, important individuals, and the growth of communities, commerce, and railways. Generally overlooked are aspects of life differing significantly from the rest of the country due to the subtropical climate. It was the flora and fauna of Florida that so greatly impressed pioneers, determined livelihoods, and was the source of most of their food.

One important resource was the sea turtle, a unique supply of food, revenue, and recreation for pioneers (and visitors) in south Florida. These massive beasts were captured by “turtle turning” by at least two men, by nets, and with spears, and was mostly a seasonal activity. This analysis of primary sources examines the role of turtles and turtling in Florida pioneer culture.

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Of all the curiosities of life and culture on the South Florida frontier¹, perhaps none was so strange, in so many ways, as the sea turtle and turtling, especially turtle turning. The pioneers to this exotic new land were faced with numerous challenges nearly unimaginable in their original homes, which were mostly the northern parts of North America and Europe. The tropical and subtropical climate was both friendly and hostile. The constraints of winter weather were absent, and it was possible to farm, fish, and hunt year-round. However, among the problems pioneers faced were a year-round burning sun, the massive geographic size of Florida, few amenities of civilization, limited transportation, and a bewildering array of strange plants and animals. Tropical fruits, wild panthers, bears (yes, bears!), alligators, crocodiles, large tropical fish, and turtles plus an array of sharks and other dangerous sea creatures that were usually new and exotic to the pioneers, yet all of these were eaten by whites, blacks, and Indians.

On the Florida frontier, plants had to be cultivated (if possible) and brought to market. Learning which plants to cultivate, and how, was still being determined in the early 20th century; hence in the 19th century, Florida newspapers reported every aspect of this agriculture. Florida’s wildlife was a source of food and revenue, and could be an enemy as well, an enemy that could destroy crops and livestock, or overtake and kill man and beast alike. The confrontation between man and nature in south Florida is still being resolved in the 21st century, but was far more threatening 100 years ago than it is today.

The northern part of the state was somewhat settled by the time of the American Civil War (1861-1865). In fact, the Spanish, in 1565, founded St. Augustine, the oldest town in North America. In 1862, in an effort to settle the vast frontiers and provide a livelihood for a growing population, Congress passed the *Homestead Act*. This legislation gave away federal government land to those who made a claim of up to 160 acres (65 hectares), erected a house, and made improvements, usually

¹This paper deals almost exclusively with the southeastern portion of the state, the original Dade County, an area which incorporates the current counties of Miami-Dade, Broward, Palm Beach, and some of the Florida Keys. Miami-Dade County is now 2,431 sq. miles (6,297 sq. km.), approximately one third of the original Dade County.

by clearing land for farming. After five years, settlers were given the deed free of charge. Indians and Southern “rebels” were excluded (a source of considerable grievance) while heads of households, immigrants, free blacks, and single women were eligible to become homesteaders, the result of which was a land rush across the central and western parts of the country.

Settlement was slower in Florida for several reasons. The sun and heat were daunting, the climate and soil largely required crops that were entirely unfamiliar further north, the shallow waters and few deep water harbors along the Florida coasts inhibited shipping to northern markets, and finally the railways barely covered the northern (and settled) portion of the state in the 1860s and 1870s. The expansion of the railways (that reached Miami in 1896) changed this and made shipping possible, although it was not until the 1950s that air-conditioning resolved the heat problem. Prior to the widespread availability of air-conditioning, many simply left Florida for the summer.

Few pioneers had the luxury of time to write about life on the Florida frontier. Farming, fishing, and hunting were year-round activities to which were added the winter-visitor business, as sportsmen and invalids who could afford to escape the harsh northern winters found Florida a pleasant refuge. Settlers were soon adding rooms, building hotels, and buying or building larger boats to accommodate the needs of winter visitors. These visitors swelled the winter population, making it possible for small communities to support newspapers that recorded local activities. However, two sportsmen, the Munroes, who each settled in Cocoanut Grove, near Miami, did write about the role of turtles in south Florida culture.

Ralph Munroe (Munroe; Gilpin, 1990) was a nationally recognized yacht designer, and was most probably the author (1892: 7) of a lengthy article on turtle eggs, which includes cooking advice and a recipe for turtle-egg omelettes. Kirk Munroe (1892), distantly related, was a sportsman and nationally known author of adventure books for boys. Both men wrote for publications that, in turn, brought more visitors and settlers to Florida. Their writings and the local newspapers are the primary sources of information on all aspects of life and culture on the Florida frontier. The Juno-based *The Tropical Sun*¹ newspaper had a woman’s page for a few years, but this was closed down only to be partially revived a few years later. *The Miami Metropolis*² newspaper was established in 1896 by Henry Flagler the same year his railway opened all the way to Miami, but it contained no recipes, and while it was a Miami booster, the *Metropolis* seemed less interested in local color than *The Tropical Sun*.

Artist John James Audubon (1945: 62-68) first traveled to Florida in 1832, and seems to have been one of the earliest to record turtling in Florida; and in 1890, J. M. Murphy published a lengthy article on *Turtling in Florida* in *Outing*. Murphy’s focus was the west coast of Florida, mostly the central area from Tampa to Sarasota, and commercial turtling. What he has to say about the turtles and turtle eggs seems to have been equally true on Florida’s eastern coast as confirmed by the newspapers. Murphy also discussed at length the use of nets and spears to capture turtles.

Net turtling was practiced on both coasts of Florida, but netting and spearing turtles were not about taking turtle eggs. It is essential that turtle eggs come from live turtles; hence turtle turning was a preferred method of capture. Turtles on average laid 50-200 eggs, nesting one to eight times per season. As Audubon explained, nearly all species of turtles³ deposit their eggs in the sand in the same manner:

“Slowly advancing landward, their heads alone above the water, ... turtles, anxious to deposit their eggs in the well-known sands. ... the moon with her silvery light now illumines the scene, and the turtle ... drags her heavy body over the sand, her flippers being better adapted for motion in water than on the shore. ... she removes the sand beneath her, casting it out on either side. Layer after layer she deposits her eggs, arranging them in the most careful manner,

¹Abbreviated in the following as *TS*.

²Abbreviated in the following as *MM*.

³This paper deals only with the green turtle, aka the sea turtle, although the less tasty loggerhead was frequently captured as well. The other principle species in Florida were the even more massive (weighing 500-1,500 lbs. or 250-700 kilos), somewhat rare, trunkback and the hawksbill, source of the commercial tortoiseshell which generally came from the Abacos, islands near the Bahamas, although hawksbill turtles were occasionally found in Florida waters. *TS*, September 8, 1893: 2.

and with her hind paddles brings the sand over them. The business is accomplished, the spot is covered over, ... the turtle swiftly retires toward the shore and launches into the deep” (63).

In the 19th century, those who stayed in Florida along the east coast between mid-May and early September participated in the unique ritual of turtle turning, mostly the massive (5' and 420 pounds, i.e., 1.5 meters & 190 kg) green turtle. Turtles lay eggs only at night, and after the eggs were laid, the turtles were *turned* (on their backs, to prevent escape to the sea) and captured the next day as they lay helpless on the beach. The eggs were a delicacy, and man soon learned to bring a gun for protection from bears that also enjoyed them. As a bonus, bear meat was sometimes served with the eggs instead of turtle meat. Raccoons also enjoyed the eggs, but frequently raided the nests when man was not around to interfere with their actions.

The idea that winter visitors were avid turtle turners is not quite accurate, neither is it entirely inaccurate. Most turtling was done outside of winter visitor *season*, which, then as now, is approximately December first through the end of March. Turtle eggs are laid from May through early September. This, in part, overlaps the hurricane season, which is June first to the end of November (although in fact most hurricanes occur in August and September). Fresh turtle eggs (which are good for about a week) were consumed mostly by those living in Florida year-round; however some undetermined number of winter visitors actually stayed on in Florida into the late spring, long enough to also enjoy fresh turtle eggs and take part in turtle turning, but left Florida before the dangers of a hurricane. In addition turtle eggs could be pickled and eaten at other times of the year.

Parties of men, or men and women, went down to the beaches usually on a moon-lit nights to find and watch turtles lay their eggs, and then to capture some of them. At New River, Miss Swanson and Mrs. Fulford “declared it an interesting and wonderful sight” (*TS*, June 10, 1891: 8).¹ While on the same page of the same newspaper, it was reported that in Cocoa Beach, “Quite a large party was over there last week, some at work, and some on pleasure bent. The hunters report killing two bear, and securing turtles, turtle eggs, clams, and many good things, not to be found anywhere save on the Florida coast” (*TS*, June 10, 1891: 8). Cocoa Beach was considered an excellent place for turtle turning, but so were Melbourne (*TS*, May 12, 1892: 1; June 2, 1892: 1; July 21, 1892), and West Palm Beach (*TS*, May 27, 1897: 1; June 3, 1897: 1; June 29, 1899: 1), as well as the beach north of Norris Cut (*MM*, May 14, 1897: 1) and Cocconut Grove (*MM*, June 10, 1898: 3; June 22, 1900: 8) near Miami.

Turtle turning could be dangerous, however, as these turtles were big and powerful. In 1891, Charles Manly Thomas of Lake Worth turned a 275-pound turtle whose powerful jaws got hold of his left index finger and severed it (*TS*, June 17, 1891: 1). Although this seems to have been the only reported accident, there were probably others as these are very big, powerful animals, and not very docile when confronted.

Hunting turtle nests (after the eggs were laid) on the beach was a feature of one individual’s fourteenth birthday party (*TS*, May 26, 1898: 1). Watching turtle eggs being laid was not infrequently referred to as sport, even a jolly sport, a popular amusement and many other terms that suggest the mood of these groups and their attitude to turtle turning. Turtles were occasionally called endearing terms, such as ‘Miss Turtle’ (*MM*, May 14, 1897: 1) and his *turtleship* (*TS*, July 21, 1892: 10; September 2, 1892: 7) reflecting a kind of familiarity and respect for an animal, also sometimes called a *sea monster* (*TS*, June 10, 1891: 1; *MM*, June 21, 1891: 5). Turtle turning became a minor symbol (the orange became *the symbol*) of Florida culture, appearing as it did, for example, on postcards.²

Turtles were more than a source of food; they were a source of revenue, a source of sport, an entertainment, and a part of the cultural landscape on south Florida’s frontier. For all of these reasons, the turtles’ annual visits to the shores of south Florida were as eagerly anticipated as any annual holiday. Throughout the 1890s, nearly every issue of every newspaper from April into late summer mentions the capture of turtles, or eating turtle in some way.

Parties searching for turtles and turtle eggs on the beaches at night were common during the laying season. After watching the turtle lay its eggs, these parties then proceeded to turtle turning,

¹New River is at Ft. Lauderdale.

²See for example: http://vintagetrapostcards.blogspot.co.il/2011_07_01_archive.html

which could be challenging, such as this encounter: "... the men ran in on it and attempted to turn it, then began a wrestle that was as good as a circus. The first break threw Grant on the sand with the turtle partly on his lap; the next break filled Otzweg's eyes, noise (sic) an(d) mouth full of sand and gravel, the turtle ten feet the short of them."

They closed up the gap and tackled the turtle again but only succeeded in holding one side up by its flippers while the flippers on the other side carried the turtle and the two men around though the sand at a lively rate – for a turtle. Finally, when the turtle stopped to breathe the men called on the ladies to come and help which they did and went at it in such a style that the turtle was soon on its back and the show was over (*TS*, May 27, 1897: 1).

This 400-pound turtle was butchered the next morning and served in a variety of ways to guests at the Seminole Hotel, as were parts of it given away to friends of the captors. The ladies reported that they greatly enjoyed themselves and were glad to be of assistance. Many other, similar, instances were reported in the paper at the time, although none in quite so lively a manner.

Not all turtles were butchered immediately. Some were captured and kept in a *kerall* (aka a *craw*, or *crawl*), an enclosure often made of sticks or logs on or near the shore in the mud or sand. Turtles were kept there and fed until they could be shipped via Titusville or Jacksonville to northern markets, mostly New York City. Thousands of turtles, most captured in gill nets, were held in these *keralls* every year for shipment (*TS*, June 10, 1891: 6; Audubon, 1945: 68). Turtle was a niche market in the seafood trade and throughout the 1890s were marketed by various fish houses that advertised in the Florida newspapers.

In the 1890s *The Tropical Sun* frequently carried recipes for turtle: turtle steak (June 17, 1891: 1; February 17, 1898: 7), turtle soup (February 17, 1891: 5), and turtle-egg bread (July 15, 1891: 5; July 7, 1892: 5). Advice on cooking turtle and turtle eggs was also published. This was crucial for the newcomer who otherwise would be unfamiliar with such exotic fare. Only the yolk of the turtle egg could be cooked, for example – something the reader might otherwise learn the hard way. *The Tropical Sun* pleaded for more turtle recipes for this very reason, but the recipes did not seem to be forthcoming (June 17, 1891: 3).

It is unfortunate that more turtle recipes were not published. What was usually published in the newspapers about turtle eggs was how many turtle eggs had been gathered in a season and by whom, and that turtle eggs were a current feature on the menu in homes and hotels. Turtle steak and turtle eggs were served with "luscious tomatoes, egg plants – in fact any quantity of fresh garden products, with the finest pineapples in the world for dessert--that is the bill of fare for most folks in this section these days," according to a report from Melbourne, Florida (*TS*, June 2, 1892: 1).

Prior to the coming of the railway, most food was the result of local farming, hunting and fishing with the occasional wreck providing a boon.¹ Staples, such as coffee, were usually brought from afar by boat, often via Key West, for its deep harbor. By May, when sea turtles came ashore to lay their eggs, the major growing season was over – hence there was more time for the turtling, plus it was growing too hot to spend every day in the sun and one needed to stay awake late into the night to go turtling.

Turtle soup² was the most famous dish served at the Peacock Inn in Cocoonut Grove in south Dade County.³ According to Ralph Munroe, "We had to stipulate that Peacock should not give us

¹Although an unreliable source, wrecked ships on the Florida coasts provided casks of wine, barrels of flour and other food stuffs, in addition to timber and assorted useful items. This was well documented by Ralph M. Munroe in *The Commodore's Story* (pp. 192-3, 204-6), although there are many other sources for this information.

²Charles and Isabella Peacock were probably familiar with turtle soup before they arrived in Florida. In 1766 a London tavern constructed tanks for keeping live turtle, others followed suit. By the end of the 19th century turtle soup was so popular in Britain it could be bought in tins. Kate Colquhoun, *Taste, the Story of Britain Through its Cooking*, New York: Bloomsbury, 2007.

³Susannah Worth, "The Peacock Inn, South Florida's First Hotel," *The Florida Historical Quarterly* (in press). The Peacock Inn was the center of life and culture in Cocoonut Grove, the oldest community in south Dade County, and is mentioned in nearly every history of south Florida. Although the Peacock Inn recipe for turtle soup was not found, the book *Last Train from Key West* includes the gopher soup recipe of Martha Peacock, sister-in-law of Charles Peacock, mother of eleven children, and an important member of the Cocoonut Grove community in her own right.

turtle more than twice a week; delicious as his soups were, too much of a good thing might pall” (Munroe; Gilpin, 1990: 158). In fact, this is exactly what may have happened to Dr. and Mrs. Skaggs, who seemed to have moved to the Peacock Inn when they grew tired of all the turtle steak and turtle soup on the Miami Hotel menu (Chesney et al., April 14, 1996: 54). The Peacock Inn seems to have heeded Ralph Munroe’s advice as they were still serving turtle in the 1890s (but perhaps not as frequently as at the Miami Hotel), for as one guest in 1895 said, “shall we ever forget that delicious green-turtle soup?” (Page Wilson, 1952: 24) Perhaps, too, the high praise bestowed on the food at the Peacock Inn was fully justified.

It is not known if the Peacocks served turtle soup in a turtle-shaped soup tureen, although it is possible, because as early as 1798, such tureens were being made in their native England, and American manufacturers were quick to follow suit. Regardless of the serving pieces used, the green turtle served in England and throughout the Atlantic world were being caught in Florida and the Caribbean.

Kirk Munroe in a story of 1892 refers to a dinner on Lignum Vitae Key (an island near the Florida mainland) where turtle was served. This dinner included “oysters, green-turtle soup, fish chowder, turtle steaks, baked kingfish, stewed ducks, roasted “possum, a variety of canned vegetables, an immense plum duff, canned fruits, crackers, cheese, and coffee.” In 1892, such a massive menu for a special meal was not uncommon. Since the story is autobiographical (or nearly so), it is probably historically accurate (or nearly so). It takes place in a tropical paradise where the fruits of the sea were there for the taking (and the guests were canoers), so all of these factors give it the ring of truth. The canned fruits and vegetables are a bit surprising, but canned food was both deplored and seen as a symbol of progress and modernity at the time. Named for the Lignum Vitae, a rare tropical hardwood that covers the island, it is also possible that few, if any, fruits and vegetables were grown there; hence the amount of fresh fruit and vegetables available might have been insufficient for so many visitors.

In addition to turtle turning, these animals were caught by nets or spears not only in the ocean, but in the rivers. According to Audubon (67-68), some turtlers put nets across the entrance of streams while other times they arranged their nets at sea ahead of a shoal of turtles. However, nets had a disadvantage in that they could be torn, especially by the swordfish or sharks who might find their way into the nets. Netting was a method used along the southeast coast of Florida, but commercial fishing was not as central as farming and tourism to the life of the communities there; therefore it is not often mentioned (or perhaps it didn’t interest the newspaper editors as much).

Audubon also explains, at great length, the spearing of turtles (66-68), but this seems to have been done mostly in the Florida Keys at the southernmost part of the state and along the West Coast of the state. No evidence for spearing turtles (or other sea animals) was found along the state’s East Coast. The abundance of sea turtle, particularly the green turtle was often remarked upon by Ralph Munroe and others who lived or traveled in Florida prior to the 1890s. This abundance and the relative ease with which they could be turned, netted, or speared might account for the importance they held in Florida in the 1890s, an importance that was not to last.

Near the end of the 19th century, Ralph Munroe recognized the problem of a shrinking number of turtles and expressed his concern for the turtles’ conservation (1897). He believed that at the cost of a few hundred dollars, safe enclosures on sand could be fenced off in many of the keys (islands) and that eggs could be taken to such hatcheries, not too dissimilar to the turtle *kerall* for mature turtles – the hatchlings could have been released once sufficiently mature to fend for themselves. But nothing was done, and so today the green turtle is no longer seen on the table, at least in America. So ends the history of one of Florida’s culinary delights.

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