

Famous Floridians: Harriet Beecher Stowe

Harriet Beecher Stowe, although best known for her novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* about the cruelty of slavery, also wrote about Florida. In the late 1800s she describes Florida as, “a tumble-down, wild, panicky kind of life—this general happy-go-luckiness which (is) Florida.” Her descriptions of picnicking, sailing, and river touring expeditions and her simple stories of events and people in this tropical “winter summer” land became the first promotional writing to interest northern tourists in Florida.



She was born in 1811 in Connecticut. She was one of eleven children of a famous preacher. She attended school, which was unusual for a girl at that time. When she was 12, her principal read her term paper aloud at her graduation. At the age of 16, Harriet became a full-time teacher. Her earliest publication was a geography book for children called a *Primary Geography for Children*.

In 1852, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was published. In this novel, Harriet tried to show what life was like for slaves who were treated harshly. Harriet lost a son when he was only months old. She could well imagine how terrible it would be for a slave mother to lose a child because the child was sold. In the book, Harriet describes the desperate flight of Eliza, a slave, as she runs across a frozen river with her son Harry in her arms to save him from being sold.

The book sold over 10,000 copies in the first week and was the best seller of its day. It sold 500,000 copies within five years. After its publication, Stowe became an international celebrity and a very popular author. She spoke out against slavery in America and Europe. According to legend, when she met President Lincoln he said, “So you're the little woman who wrote the book that started this Great War!” (Civil War)

During her writing career of 51 years, she published many books and shorter pieces. She wrote on a wide range of subjects including homemaking, raising children, and religion. She wrote poems, travel books, biographical sketches, and children's books. She did this while raising seven children and managing a household. She was fortunate in having the support of her husband, which was unusual for this time when women were not expected to have a career beyond the home.

In the 1860s, the Stowes purchased property in Mandarin, Florida, on the St. Johns River (near Jacksonville). They began to travel South each winter. The Stowes arrived in Florida nearly twenty

years ahead of Henry Flagler. Harriet, her brother Charles Beecher, and others felt Florida did not have as many racial divisions as the rest of the South following the Civil War. They dreamed of making the state a safe place for freedmen and progressive northerners. Harriet helped establish schools for African American children in Florida.

In 1872, Stowe published *Palmetto Leaves*. The book was a compilation of pieces she wrote after she and her husband began wintering in Mandarin. It is a book filled with ink drawings and words about the people and wildlife of the area. It includes stories like the one about her picnic on Julington Creek with its “bright sun, a blue sky, a fresh, strong breeze upon the water.”

Drawings show palm trees and happy dogs. There are views of the St. Johns River, “like a looking-glass, the sun staring steadfastly down.” There is a drawing of the “stately orange tree, thirty feet high with spreading, graceful top and varnished green leaves” that sat outside her home.

Palmetto Leaves ends with Stowe’s support of human rights. She comments that the prosperity of the southern states, “must depend, on a large degree, to the right treatment and education of the Negro population.” The book has been reissued and is available in bookstores.

An article titled “Our Florida Plantation” by Harriet Beecher Stowe was printed in the *Atlantic Monthly* magazine in 1879. To the right are some excerpts.

At her best, Stowe was an early and effective realist. Her portraits of local social life and her settings communicate the culture of her time. She provides us today a picture of the Florida of her time, the 1800s.

Our Florida Plantation

It was a hazy, dreamy, sultry February day, such as comes down from the skies of Florida in the opening of spring. A faint scent of orange blossoms was in the air, though as yet there seemed to be only white buds on the trees. The deciduous forests along the banks of the broad St. John’s were just showing that misty dimness which announces the opening of young buds. The river lay calm as a mirror, streaked here and there with broad bands of intenser blue which melted dreamily into purplish mists in the distance....

At last we came to the plantation house, a rambling, one-story cottage, with a veranda twelve feet wide in front. It was situated in a yard enclosed by a picket fence, under a tuft of magnificent Spanish oaks....

The plantation, we were told, had been in former days the leading one in Florida. It included nine thousand acres—there was a touch of the magnificent in this fact. It had employed five hundred slaves. It had raised quantities of the long-staple cotton, held to be the very finest variety of that necessary article; it had raised, beside, harvests of sugarcane, and in the days before the great frost of 1835 was said to have had a fine productive orange grove, of which by the bye, not a trace remained.