

# Flagler City and the Florida Land Boom and Bust of the 1920s

By Randy Jaye

The Florida Land Boom of the 1920s started in the Miami area after Carl Graham Fisher (1874-1939), automobile industry pioneer and promoter and highway construction and real estate developer, launched a nationwide advertising campaign for beautiful and potentially profitable Miami Beach real estate. Florida's early twentieth century image as a "pioneer" state quickly changed as dreams of a quality life in a tropical climate lured thousands of people into the state.

Brilliant marketing campaigns (**Figures 1 & 2**) created ready-made cities that included Coral Gables, Hialeah, Boca Raton and Venice. Hundreds of subdivisions were built within the state and many included alluring and ornate entranceways (**Figure 3**).



**Figure 1** – Florida News – September 14, 1925 – Real Estate and Investors Guide – “The Greatest Real Estate Development in the World”.



**Figure 2** – Tropical Paradise Poster – “Florida - Go By Train - Pennsylvania Railroad” ca. 1925.

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**Figure 3** - *The Tarragona Tower in Daytona Beach – built in 1925 to serve as a showy and atypical entranceway to the 1000-acre Daytona Highlands Mediterranean Revival residential development (originally called Coquina Highlands). Photograph by Author.*

The Florida Land Boom of the 1920s sparked the Mediterranean Revival architectural style to peak as it blended Spanish, Italian, Mediterranean, Venetian and Gothic details into many structures including lavish hotels (**Figure 4**), apartment buildings, commercial complexes, mansions and smaller houses.

The national media published exaggerated stories about the glories of Florida, which included ignoring Prohibition<sup>1</sup> laws within the state and easy access to beer, wine and spirits, potential quick real estate fortunes and year-round agricultural capabilities. Consumer credit also came of age as many people gained the capability of purchasing homes and land with little of their own money. Property prices rapidly rose on mere speculation as the boom spread to several areas around Florida.



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*Figure 4 – The Breakers Hotel in Palm Beach is an excellent example of the Mediterranean Revival architectural style. Source: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=6426605>*

It did not take long before criminally speculative schemes arose that caused many investors to get defrauded by dishonest people such as the Italian swindler and con artist Charles Ponzi (1882-1949) who took advantage of the situation. Ponzi utilized an unscrupulous and fraudulent scheme (now known as the Ponzi scheme) that lured investors and paid profits to earlier investors by using the funds from newer investors. Ponzi, and other swindlers, also sold mail order building lots that were physically under water.

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## Flagler County's Flagler City Development

The Florida Land Boom of the 1920s did not bypass Flagler County as it swept its



**Figure 5** – A 1919 Map of the Dixie Highway. *Source: Flagler County Historical Society.*

way through the state. The economic prosperity of the 1920s prompted bold land development projects such as the proposed Flagler City (a \$20,000,000 construction project of a new town midway between St. Augustine and Daytona Beach that was financed by the Flagler City Holding Company and backed by group of Philadelphia bankers). Flagler City was located about eight miles north of Bunnell and was to span four miles on each side of Dixie Highway. As Dixie Highway ran through sparsely populated Flagler County (**Figure 5**) and was one of the fastest automobile transportation highways in the 1920s, and linked the Great Lakes area all the way to Miami, the Flagler City development concept seemed to have a strategic location with plenty of land to build on and a potentially lucrative future.

Advertisements (**Figures 6 & 7**) and articles regarding Flagler City began to appear in the *Flagler Tribune*<sup>2</sup> early in 1926. These advertisements made it apparent that Flagler City's location along the Dixie Highway was a major advertising strategy.

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Yesterday, I took a drive along the Dixie—

Not my first trip, but the one that impressed upon me more strongly than ever before the dominance of this great highway—the absolute certainty that along its course property values were certain to grow and grow. In a distance of thirty miles I saw an almost endless stream of motor cars going into Florida. A short distance beyond Daytona Beach my attention was called to “A new city in the making” —

Here I witnessed a thrilling scene of activity—trucks, tractors, road-making equipment, sand, cement, rock, attractive street signs, actual construction of buildings. All in preparation for what I am sure will never fail, set far distant, be a profitable link in the great chain of thriving communities that will form an almost endless chain of prosperity from one end of the United States to the other along the Dixie Highway.

I was told that I could buy a lot here (on the Dixie) for a little as \$12.00 a front foot. A block or two away a lot, full size (Sixty feet), for only \$20.

I CAME, I SAW, I BOUGHT  
“Just an Average Man”  
And I bought from the  
OWNERS AND DEVELOPERS OF  
FLAGLER CITY

**Bleekman-Robinson**  
Syndicate, Inc.

Executive Offices - 218 North Beach Street  
DAYTONA BEACH

Sales Offices at  
Miami, Jacksonville, Kansas City, Philadelphia,  
New York, Chicago, St. Louis, Atlantic City, Hartford

**Figure 6 - Flagler City – Yesterday, I took a drive along the Dixie – a full-page advertisement in the Flagler Tribune – February 4, 1926. Source: Flagler County Historical Society.**

IN THE SMALLEST VILLAGE IN THE UNITED STATES EVERYONE KNOWS

The Dixie Highway

Just for a moment--consider what you can get on this great thoroughfare for only

**\$20.00**  
A Front Foot In

**Flagler City.**  
-on the Dixie

- Here the Dixie is 80 ft. wide.
- With curbs and sidewalks.
- Beautiful White Way Lights.
- Water and electricity on every lot.
- Intersecting hard-surfaced streets.
- Just a step distant from numerous established communities.
- The finest Florida Beach within easy access.
- Near the great resort, Flagler Springs.
- In a wonderful farming section.

And, at a price unusual.

Owned and Developed by  
**Bleekman-Robinson**  
Syndicate, Inc.

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Sales Offices at  
Miami, Jacksonville, Kansas City, Philadelphia,  
New York, Chicago, St. Louis, Atlantic City, Hartford

**Figure 7 - Flagler City – In the smallest village in the United States everyone knows the Dixie Highway – a full-page advertisement in the Flagler Tribune – February 4, 1926. Source: Flagler County Historical Society.**

The Flagler City development was owned by the Bleekman-Robinson Syndicate, Inc. They maintained an executive office at 218 North Beach Street in Daytona Beach. The company also had several sales offices located in Miami, New York, Jacksonville, Chicago, Kansas City, Atlantic City, Philadelphia and Hartford.

As consumer credit enabled people to purchase land and housing in Florida many banks, including Flagler County’s Bunnell State Bank, used hyped-up advertisements to entice prospective buyers (Figure 8).

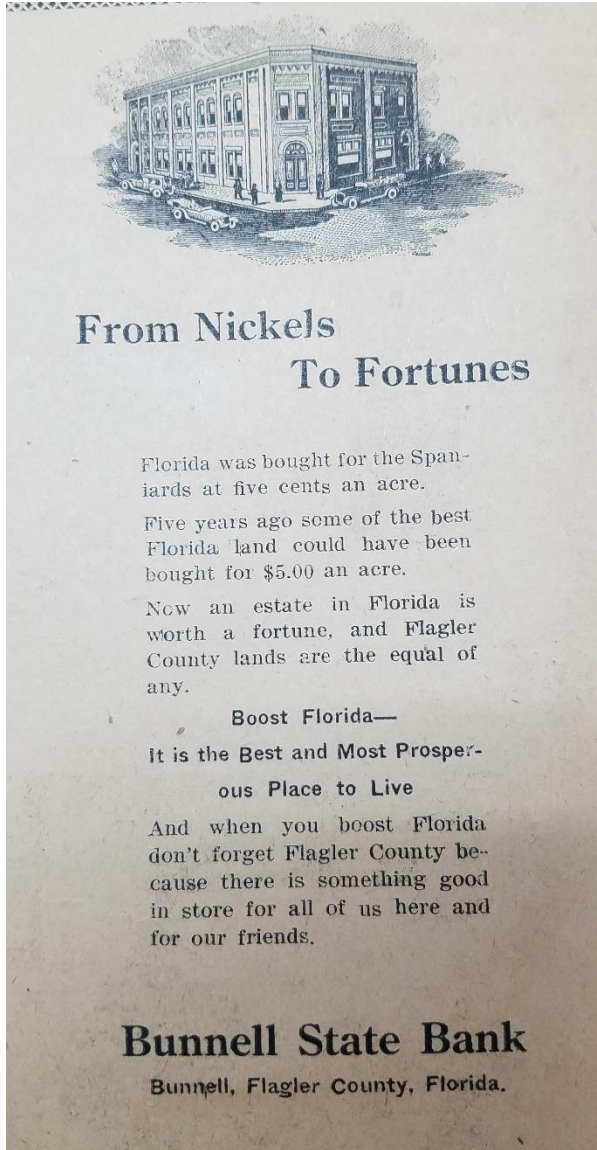


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## Breaking Ground for Flagler City

On January 28, 1926, the *Flagler Tribune* reported that Flagler City was to be one of the largest developments in Florida. With available vacant land, advertising and



**Figure 8 - From Nickels to Fortunes – Now an estate in Florida is worth a fortune, and Flagler County lands are the equal of any. Bunnell State Bank – advertisement in the *Flagler Tribune* – March 12, 1925. Source: *Flagler County Historical Society*.**

available credit the Flagler City development was set to begin breaking ground.

Flagler City began with the laying out of streets, concrete curbing, sidewalks and a gas station. The *Flagler Tribune* also reported the sale of several building lots where the construction of houses were being planned (**Figure 9**).

The developers also had plans to widen the stretch of Dixie Highway running through Flagler City to 80 feet.

### The Grandeur Concept for Flagler City

In addition to houses, the modern municipality of Flagler City was to include a water and light plant, a two-story drug store, a \$2,500,000 pleasure resort (that was to be named Flagler Springs), \$3,000,000 in community improvements, a waterway for drainage

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and pleasure craft, golf course, country club, several business buildings and fifteen thousand acres of farms of five acres and greater.

**Progress**

## Flagler City

*-on the Dixie*

Guaranteed Improvements in Flagler City, Many which are now in:

|                 |                 |
|-----------------|-----------------|
| Sidewalks       | Inland Waterway |
| Curbs           | Golf Course     |
| Electric Lights | Country Club    |
| White Way       | Hotel           |
| Water           | Health Resort   |

**Nationally Known Expert**  
Is Appointed Director of  
Flagler Little Farms

K. W. Lord, graduate of the University of Wisconsin with 18 years agricultural experience, and former agent of St. Johns County, has been appointed agricultural director of Flagler Little Farms and at present is laying out a 120-acre model farm. Mr. Lord will be at the disposal of all purchasers of Flagler Little Farms and will advise them on all phases of agriculture and agricultural development.

Flagler Little Farms comprises 10,000 fertile acres cut into small farms of 10, 20 and 15 acres each.

**BUILDINGS UNDER CONSTRUCTION:**  
Two-story Drug Store; Two-story Store and Apartment; Five Sincco Bungalows.

These are the first unit of 14 houses to be built by the Kaybee Construction Co.

Filling Station and Repair Shop.

150 FEET OF CONCRETE SIDEWALKS LAYED DAILY  
150 FEET OF CONCRETE CURB AND GUTTER LAYED DAILY

Unit 1 Sold Out in the Record Time of five weeks.  
Unit 2 Now Selling. Prices Advance March 15.

Dixie Highway Frontage, \$20 a Front Foot.  
Residential Lots, 50x135, \$150 up. Terms, 1-4 Cash.

### Bleekman-Robinson

Syndicate, Inc.

Executive Offices - 218 North Beach Street  
DAYTONA BEACH

Sales Offices at:

Miami, Jacksonville, Kansas City, Philadelphia,  
New York, Chicago, St. Louis, Atlantic City, Hartford

**Figure 9 - Flagler City – Progress – a full-page advertisement in the Flagler Tribune – March 14, 1926. Source: Flagler County Historical Society.**

A camp large enough to house 200 construction workers was planned in anticipation of a rapid construction and development schedule. A 120-acre model farm was also planned to assist people would purchase Flagler little farms.

K.W. Lord, a farming expert and former county agent for St. Johns County, was hired by Bleekman Robinson Syndicate, Inc. to supervise the model farm. Lord was to raise a dairy herd of Guernsey cattle<sup>3</sup> and start a flock of 2000 chickens to provide a practical example and to assist farmers with the agricultural and livestock

possibilities of the Flagler County area.

## Flagler City and the Florida Land Boom of the 1920s Goes Bust

As the Florida Land Boom began to collapse so did Flagler City. Advertisements and articles in the *Flagler Tribune* regarding Flagler City vanished by the middle of

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1926. Flagler City disappeared faster than it started, and decades later only some concrete curbing remained as a faint reminder of the once grandeur development concept.

Several factors contributed to the collapse of the Florida Land Boom of the 1920s. By 1925, negative press and IRS investigations regarding Florida investments revealed that the land prices were based on the expectation of finding a customer and not on actual land value. Investors and speculators started to have difficulty in finding new buyers and closing sales.

In October 1925, due to a rail traffic gridlock of building materials, the three major railroads in Florida (Atlantic Coast Line Railroad, Florida East Coast Railway and the Seaboard Air Line Railway) created an embargo which permitted the shipment of essential commodities only (including food, fuel and perishables) to enter or move within the state. This embargo crippled new construction and substantially slowed down the land boom.

On January 10, 1926, a 241-foot steel-hulled schooner named the *Prinz Valdemar* sank in the Miami harbor and blocked access into the harbor. With ships now unable to transport construction materials coupled with the railway embargo the land boom in the Miami area was considerable slowed down. This resulted in less land and house buyers and exposed the exaggerated property price escalation that was fueling the land boom. The national image of Miami, and Florida, as a tropical paradise became tarnished. A rapid decline of the Florida Land Boom of the 1920s ensued.

To make matters worse, two highly destructive hurricanes, the Miami Hurricane of 1926 and the Okeechobee Hurricane of 1928, caused widespread damage causing many developers to go bankrupt.



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Finally, the Wall Street Crash of 1929 led to the Great Depression, which officially ended the Florida Land Boom of the 1920s.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> In 1920, the Eighteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution enabled legislation known as the Volstead Act. This began nationwide **Prohibition** in the United States that banned the production, importation, transportation, and sale of alcoholic beverages. This was one of the most unpopular laws in U.S. history as many people flagrantly ignored the laws and consumed alcohol. The most damaging result of Prohibition was that criminal gangs gained control of the beer and liquor supply in many cities, which funded organized crime and allowed it to expand while lowering local tax revenues. In 1933, the Twenty-first Amendment repealed the Eighteenth Amendment and ended Prohibition in the United States.

<sup>2</sup> The *Flagler Tribune* was originally named the *St. Johns Tribune*, which was a weekly newspaper that was established in 1913. In 1917, when Flagler County was incorporated the newspaper changed its name to the *Flagler Tribune*. In 1981, the *Flagler Tribune* newspaper was purchased by the News-Journal Corporation. The News-Journal then merged it with the *Palm Coast News* and renamed the newspaper to the *Flagler/Palm Coast News-Tribune*.

<sup>3</sup> **Guernsey cattle** originated in the Channel Islands between France and England and are named for the Isle of Guernsey. The breed was developed over 200 years to meet modern dairy requirements. Guernsey cattle produce unique rich yellow colored milk.

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