THE TRIUMPHS AND TRAGEDIES of America’s westward expansion—when routes of transport were daringly blazed through a vast and difficult landscape, generally at the expense of native peoples—have a precursor in American history. British Florida was the frontier of the colonial period, and at the center of it was the King’s Road, an often-make-shift roadway carved out of the Florida swamps that, for the better part of a century, was the principal link connecting the peninsula to the remainder of the growing country.

Planned by the British, scouted by a Creek Indian, and built by slaves, the 126 mi long King’s Road, built between the St. Marys River and a giant indigo plantation at New Smyrna (now named New Smyrna Beach), saw its share of soldiers, builders, refugees, fugitives, and freed people. It was designated an ASCE Historic Civil Engineering Landmark in 1976.

“It was over the King’s Road that most of the increasing land travel from the states to eastern Florida took place,” wrote Alice Whitman in “Transportation in Territorial Florida,” (Florida Historical Quarterly, Vol. 17, No. 1, July 1938, pages 25–53).

“It is probably one of the most important planned roads in America,” adds William Ryan, director of the Flagler County Historical Society and author of The Search for Old King’s Road: The First Route into Florida (Scotts Valley, California: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2012).

Florida has a long history of settlement. Native American people inhabited the region for thousands of years. The Spanish reached the peninsula in 1513. As Spain’s empire
in the New World developed over the next two centuries, the Spaniards founded St. Augustine in 1565 on Florida’s east coast. The presidio was meant to defend treasure-laden ships full of gold and silver as they passed from Mexico to Europe.

At the close of the French and Indian War (the North American theater of the Seven Years’ War) in 1763, Spain ceded Florida to the British in exchange for Cuba and the Philippines. In 1764, Col. James Grant was appointed governor of East Florida, which comprised the bulk of the present-day state. (West Florida comprised the far western panhandle as well as the southern portions of present-day Alabama and Mississippi.)

Ryan wrote that Florida had few settlers at that point—some 3,000 Spaniards had left in fear of British rule. Grant, according to Ryan, described the land as a “State of Nature, not an acre of land planted…and nobody to work or at work.” Further, Ryan continued, “The few narrow routes that existed were often impassable in rainy weather and fit only for foot or horse traffic under optimal conditions.”

In a 1977 ASCE report (“The King’s Road: A National Historic Civil Engineering Landmark”), the late James H. Schaub, Ph.D., FASCE, a professor and chair of civil engineering at the University of Florida, wrote that the British had issued a proclamation in 1763 that invited settlers from around the New World to colonize Florida. But no one came because there was no means to travel over land to get there. Grant, Schaub wrote, “proposed a subscription road with contributions for its construction to be solicited from interested persons in Florida, Georgia, and South Carolina.” He contributed his own money and by July 1765 had raised about 500 guineas, roughly $330,000 in today’s currency.

There was already a crude path from Savannah, Georgia, to St. Augustine. Routes were surveyed for the northern section of the road, from the Georgia border to St. Augustine. The road was built between 1766 and 1775 by a series of “subcontractors”—landowners and plantation owners who agreed to take on construction of certain portions.

In his report, Schaub speculated that the road was largely a “cleared strip with minimal drainage and extensive use of corduroy in those areas where swamps or low places could not be avoided.”

According to a 2009 history of the road written by Paul L. Weaver, the president of Historic Property Associates Inc., of St. Augustine, for St. Johns County Growth Management Services (The King’s and Pablo Roads: Florida’s First Highways, A Narrative History of Their Construction and Routes in St. Johns County), the road was largely with slave labor, the 126 mi long King’s Road was, for almost a century, the principal link connecting Florida with the rest of America.
After Spain ceded Florida to Britain, the British conceived the King’s Road—shown above connecting with another road to Savannah, Georgia—to lure settlers from the growing colonies to the north.

County, the King’s Road measured 16 ft across, “with ditches and pine logs laid crosswise in the wet portions (corduroy ribbing) and causeways through the swamps and bridges across the many creeks and rivers.”

Working conditions were difficult in the swamplands of Florida, with the work of building the road performed largely by slaves. Ryan recounted a 1772 letter that David Yeats, secretary of the province, wrote to Grant, in which he noted that slaves were forced to clear obstructions from the roadway, cut trees low enough to “permit carriage wheels to pass over the stumps,” dig drainage ditches, and pack the roadways—most likely with crushed coquina and oyster shells taken from ancient Indian mounds. In northern Flagler County, British engineers and their slaves built a 200 ft long earth-filled causeway. North of St. Augustine, the King’s Road followed the central sand ridge that runs north–south through St. Johns County. This was a relatively easy section to build, although securing subcontractors to build it took years.

But south of St. Augustine, the terrain turned more difficult—wet, muddy, and dense with foliage. In the southern part of the planned road, Ryan wrote, “British Engineers faced what at first appeared to be [impassable] conditions.”

But Grant apparently had befriended a Creek Indian named Grey Eyes—he claimed in 1767 that his “friend” had blazed a trail that others had been unable to. Grey Eyes had driven a herd of 500 cattle south through the swampy region and knew the best route. British engineers planned the southern portion of the road based on this meandering alignment.

Grant and other leaders were hoping the road would spur the growth of a massive plantation economy. According to the State Library and Archives of Florida (floridamemory.com), “African slaves constituted the majority in British-controlled Florida, numbering about 11,200 of a total population of 17,300, or nearly 65 percent.”

Grant planned the King’s Road to terminate roughly 65 mi south of St. Augustine, at a site at which a prominent Scottish physician, Andrew Turnbull, had received a land grant to establish a plantation on what was then called Mosquito Inlet (now Ponce de Leon Inlet). Turnbull named the site New Smyrna because his wife was the daughter of a merchant in Smyrna, which at the time was a city in Asia Minor (present-day Turkey).

Turnbull brought more than 1,400 migrants from the Mediterranean, including Greeks, Italians, and Minorcans (from the tiny island off the coast of Spain) to work as indentured laborers on the massive indigo plantation he was building south of St. Augustine. Eight ships set sail in the spring of 1768, arriving in St. Augustine in June. “These perhaps were the first Florida immigrants [who] had been attracted by the glowing promises of a land developer,” Ryan wrote, adding that “Turnbull was reported to have produced a promotional brochure.”

The Minorcan migrants faced nothing but difficulties. Accounts vary, but at least 100 died during the voyage to Florida. “Shortly after landing,” Ryan wrote, “things began to go badly.” There was inadequate housing and food. Overseers didn’t speak the languages of the migrants, and they treated them like slaves. “Hard work, brutal overseers, short food supplies, the climate, disease and discontent quickly caused desperation in the new settlers,” he wrote. “By the end of 1768 some 450 of the original group were reported dead.”

Some of the Minorcans revolted. Ironically, though the King’s Road itself was complete, Weaver reported that provincial troops sent to assist Turnbull were subjected to lengthy delays on the road while trying to reach the settlement to help put down the revolt.

Turnbull’s plantation eventually became a financial success, but laborers revolted again in 1777 when they had completed their indentured servitude but were not freed. By April of that year, 90 Minorcans fled the colony for St. Augustine—600 more would follow. Ryan quoted an 1837 account of the Mi-
norcans’ trek north written by John Lee Williams (The Territory of Florida, New York City: A.T. Goodrich, 1837): “The women and children, with the old men, were placed in the centre, and the stoutest men armed with wooden spears, were placed in [the] front and rear. In this order, they set off like the children of Israel from a place that had proved an Egypt to them. So secretly had they conducted the transaction, that they proceeded some miles, before the overseers discovered that the place was deserted.”

The Minorcans were ultimately sheltered in St. Augustine and became an important part of the community. In subsequent years, as more plantations were established along the coast and plantation owners complained about the state of the road, Grant set about to upgrade it—initiating a long pattern over the life of the road in which it would deteriorate, be rehabilitated, and deteriorate again.

The King’s Road continued to be a nexus of conflict and movement. During the American Revolution, the road helped the British defend the colony, which remained loyal to the British Crown. The road also became the route for “fleeing refugees, Indians, and slaves coming south towards the doubtful safety of St. Augustine,” wrote Ryan. Thousands of slaves and British Tories poured into St. Augustine before and after the war, seeking safety.

After the war, the British relinquished possession of Florida back to Spain, which held the territory until ceding it by treaty to the United States in 1819. As Weaver noted, fewer than 2,000 British inhabitants remained—most, fearful of a Catholic monarch, left their lands, “though some owners of generous spreads upon well situated river banks and along the coastline stayed.”

The region became a little more egalitarian, as black slaves escaped south to the comparative freedom of Spanish Florida, intermingling with the Seminoles and the Spanish. At the same time, maintenance of the roadway and bridges along the King’s Road stopped. And Seminole tribes—with no army in the way—destroyed plantations along the road.

The U.S. Army rebuilt the road between 1828 and 1831. According to Weaver, no authoritative documentation of the route of the King’s Road would be produced until the United States government surveys of the 1830s. Those surveys showed that the King’s Road still largely followed the route first mapped in 1769 by William de Brahm, the surveyor general of Britain’s southern colonies.

But the work of the American surveyors was interrupted by the outbreak of the second of three Seminole Wars. Together these wars, which lasted until 1858, pitted the Seminoles against a United States determined to relocate southern tribes west of the Mississippi. In the second war, which ended in 1842, more than 1,500 U.S. Army soldiers died and more than 3,000 Seminoles were removed to Indian Territory, according to the Seminole Nation Museum.

On Christmas Day 1835, according to Weaver’s account, bands of Seminoles burned the buildings in New Smyrna and began raiding plantations along the river. “Within two months hardly a building remained standing from St. Augustine to New Smyrna,” Weaver wrote. “As the settlers fled to protected towns or military posts, the Indians set to work destroying the vestiges of white occupation, including the bridges along the route of the King’s Road.”

The road south of St. Augustine took years to rebuild—settlers petitioned Congress for funds for repair, and Weaver cites an army lieutenant who claimed the road was rebuilt by 1838. But in 1844, settlers went to Congress again for funds, claiming the road had once more become impassable: “Not until that date, in late 1844, was the resettlement of New Smyrna, vacated some nine years before, contemplated.”

Some semblance of the King’s Road lasted into the Civil War; beef that fed Confederate soldiers was shipped north from ranches in Florida. Still, in the decades after the Civil War, the road saw little use. By the 1880s, train lines were being established on the state’s Atlantic coast. A generation later came modern roads.

The King’s Road, Ryan says, died a “normal death.” It became a sandy pathway that people were still using, but modern roads were either built on top of or adjacent to it.

By 1915, the Florida State Road Department (the predecessor of the Florida Department of Transportation) was established, and counties throughout the state began planning modern roadways. Much of the road’s path was incorporated into the Dixie Highway, which extended from the Great Lakes to Miami. “The King’s Road,” Ryan says, “ceased to exist around 1920.”

But in establishing an early link between Florida and the colonies to the north, the King’s Road helped set the stage for the Sunshine State’s dramatic growth.

“Though its location was shifted, portions abandoned, and maintenance varied from poor to nonexistent,” wrote Schaub, “this pioneer road provided an entry for settlers and an overland route of communication and commerce until the 20th century.” —T.R. WITCHER

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_T.R. Witcher is a contributing editor to Civil Engineering._