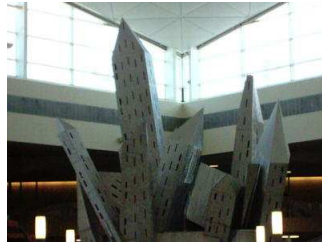


June 2008: Family Vacation - South and Midwest

1. Florida

Friday June 13: (Yes, we travelled on Friday the 13th!) My family hasn't been together on an airplane since Grandpa Norton took everyone (except for me) to New England many years ago, so it was a treat for all of us together. Even admiring the art in the Dallas/Fort Worth and Miami airports.



Dallas



Dallas



Miami

Miami is supposed to be the "Most Improved Airport in North America". I would hate to have dealt with it in earlier days! It was pretty stressful...



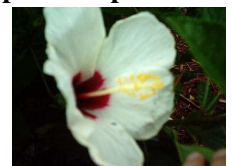
Jerri got us an inexpensive hotel right on the bay. Here's the view! After settling in, we walked down the bay to a nice relaxing (and non-inexpensive) Italian restaurant and relaxed outside right at the rail at the water's edge.

Saturday June 14: Keys Homestead, the gateway to the Keys, the Everglades, and Biscayne Bay, is an hour's drive south from Miami. Key Largo is about an hour's drive from Homestead. Key West is two hours from Key Largo. *Long* day's drive.



South Florida is actually subtropical. The plants are amazing. This tree is all over, and they're all blooming right now. The Key West tour guide told us the name, but "flamboyant" is the only word that stuck, whether it's the name or an apt description. Or other plants like this flower: 5 inches across. The Keys' particular

plant is the mangrove tree, which grows a tangle of roots into the submerged soil, and then those tangled roots capture sediment, which both cleans the brilliant green water and grows the island.



Key West is an amazing place; it deserves more than the few hours we had. Its story is one of economic turmoil. The natural sponge industry was big ("statue" at the Sponge Market in the historic Old Town)... until the "Red Tide" killed them off. The transplanted Cuban cigar industry was big... until a hurricane destroyed most of the factories, and the owners moved their businesses to Tampa (which is now the biggest producer of Cuban cigars). The Navy was big here... until the Navy closed the big sea base (an air station and a listening post remain). The "industry" of scavenging ships that wrecked on the coral reef enriched many... until better navigation guides reduced the number of wrecks to almost zero. So now tourism is the big thing.



Which is why, when a storm destroyed the old lighthouse, they rebuilt it - in the middle of the island.

And also why they have a marker for the "Southernmost Point in the Continental United States". Okay, well, they may have had that anyways.



But that's okay, that's why we're here. So we do the tourist things, like walking through the historic district, which is now mostly a tourist trap district. There is a trolley service, which is both transportation to various key places on the island and a guided tour. Quite good. The guide explained an interesting thing about Key West. Not long ago (mid 1980s), the Border Patrol had set up a checkpoint above Key West,



and everyone going into or out of Key West had to prove citizenship and be subjected to search. In other words, Key West was being treated as if it were a foreign country. This was not good for tourism. After numerous useless attempts to settle the matter through normal channels, the mayor and council of Key West embarked on a new tactic: They declared Key West as a sovereign nation, separate from the

United States, and called it the Conch Republic. I guess they did this seriously enough that not long after, the Border Patrol removed the checkpoint. To this day, the Conch Republic flag (including the motto "We Seceded Where Others Failed") is flown outside homes and businesses all over the island.

Incidentally, about the conch: It's not just a shell. It's a snail, or mollusk, used for food especially by the Bahamians, who form a significant part of Key West's population, and brought some of their customs. Key West adopted the conch as their identity. Conch Republic, for instance. And their high school football team is "The Fighting Conches", with the shell decal on their helmets. Note that "conch" is pronounced "konk".

Another thing the guide explained was about the beaches. It seems that the coral reef which extends down the Keys, in addition to being a navigation hazard, to the advantage of historical Key West wreckers, also modifies the wave action, and prevents a sandy beach from forming. So in order to make the place more tourist-attractive, Key West imported sand from Bahama and other nearby places.



Rocky shore of Key Matacumbe - coral and limestone



Artificial beach on southern shore of Key West

After our four hour trip into Key West, a quick look through Old Town, a tour trolley ride, looking at the lighthouse and the Southernmost Point, it was already pretty late. Really, such an interesting place deserves all day, or a few days. Another four hour trip back to Miami, and a busy day tomorrow.

Sunday June 15: Everglades Between sleeping too long in the morning, having to try out the hotel swimming pool, and another hour and a half drive south out of Miami, we didn't start until late morning. We had a choice between the glass-bottom boats for viewing coral at Biscayne National Park or Key Largo, or the mangrove swamp boat tour at Everglades. I think we made the wrong choice, but the Everglades was still worth it.

The Everglades is often billed as a swamp, but it's really not, it's essentially a very wide (8 miles), very shallow (inches to 5 feet) river that flows seasonally, when the rains cause Lake Okeechobee to overflow. We arrived during the wet season, but Florida (and most of the South) has been in a drought, so it wasn't *too* wet, and the bugs were 1/10 what they normally are at this time of year. Which was good, since even with our repellent that smelled and felt like WD-40, the mosquitos and biting flies were numerous and aggressive.

Of course, the big attraction is the alligators. The two most popular hiking trails are at the visitor center near the park entrance. One passes through a grassy wetland and a pond that are full of gators and other things. Right under the boardwalk, this small mommy gator was surrounded by her hatchling brood of ten or eleven youngsters.



At the pond, they were everywhere, especially lying on the banks sleeping. They weren't as big as some we've seen in zoos, but they were wild, and in the park. Shucks, they weren't as big as the few my Huntsville friends tell me are wandering around the creeks of Wheeler Wildlife Refuge and the Arsenal. But this is what southern Florida is famous for.



The pond had other things in it, like this soft-shell turtle, who was up on the bank digging a hole with its hind claws. Don't know why. It has an interesting nose, with nostrils at the end of its protruding snout, like a short elephant trunk, clearly so it can "snorkel". Just behind it in the water was a large alligator, slowly drifting toward the shore.

Charity was hoping she might get the chance to see an alligator eat something, but I think even a soft-shell turtle is too much for an alligator to get down. We didn't wait to see, for we were already pushing it to get to the boat ride at Flamingo.

After a forty-minute drive to Flamingo, we arrived just in time to get a lunch, bolt it, and climb on the last pontoon boat trip of the day. The guide was a Xanterra employee rather than a park ranger, but he was pretty good at pointing things out, mostly birds and the features of the mangrove trees. Interesting plants; the original seed (dropped into the water fully germinated and sprouting; "live birth" as the guide commented) has an original trunk, but as it grows, it sprouts additional support roots that arch down into the water. As it continues to grow and develops a canopy, it sprouts roots from its branches that grow down toward the water and the soil underneath. The Black Mangrove sends up little breathing tubes from its submerged roots. And apparently, as the little seedlings float around, it doesn't take much depth for them to find a sand bar, take root, and start another colony. These mangrove islands are just everywhere.



I was a bit surprised; I thought the tour would go south, toward Florida Bay, but it went north into Whitehead Bay. There hardly is a real "tip" to Florida, it's just a patchwork mess of bays, lakes, and interconnected waterways. For all that, it isn't very deep; Whitehead is 5 feet at its deepest. Faith could walk from one end to the other on the bottom! At one point, we saw some bottlenose dolphins! (Sorry, no pics; they were shy.) There are manatee signs (warning boaters to be careful, manatees are injured and killed by boat motors) all over, but we didn't see any. So for a two-hour tour - which was pleasant for all that - we didn't see as much interesting stuff as we might have with the glass-bottom boat.

After the boat returned, we walked over to the Flamingo visitor center. Everything was practically deserted. There are (were?) nice lodges for overnight visitors, but abandoned, and overgrown with vines. The center itself was neglected and decaying. We met the ranger who explained (with his photo album) that Hurricane Katrina did a good bit of damage, but it had come from the northeast, and Miami had taken most of the force of Katrina. Hurricane Wilma came from the



southeast the same year, and devastated the area. The sea level from the storm surge washed up to window level of the second-story visitor center! The lodges were all submerged and filled with mud. The restaurant which used to be on that second story of the visitors center was ruined. There are plans to rebuild, but having learned at Death Valley how the Park Service doles out the money, there isn't a lot of hope to see anything soon.



We then went to the end of the park, where the abandoned campground and picnic area lay, and checked out the strange coast. It isn't sand, and it isn't rocky; it's like soft white cement. The Key West guide mentioned how, when the Navy was dredging the coast and dumping the earth to enlarge the island, the material would harden practically to rock. Too hard even to dig graves; the cemetery there

was all above-ground crypts. He called it "marl", I think. This may be the same stuff.

On the way back, we visited this walkway over the grassland, where you can get an idea of what the Everglades really is. If this were *really* the wet season, there would be 6-18 inches of water flowing through the grass.



Another stop: On slightly higher ground, a stand of slash pines. The limestone bedrock is pierced with "solution holes", where decaying vegetable matter generates weak acid and dissolves large pits, which retain water during the dry season and further encourage plant growth. Some of the pits were quite wide and/or deep. Quite a diversity of features in the

Everglades region.

On the way out, we got our "we were here" picture.



Monday June 16: Kennedy Space Center Well, that's what it was supposed to be. We got a late start (waiting for FedEx to deliver a package of stuff we forgot to pack - thanks, Jeremiah and Stacy!). Then we visited Miami Beach. Which is what



Miami is famous for. Beautiful; soft, cool sand; clean, green water; and it falls off quickly - twenty feet from shore, and you're swimming. There is so much to this place. Definitely worth a return trip.

Then we got stuck in slow traffic on I-95 just north of Fort Lauderdale. Then we took a detour to look at a lighthouse in Jupiter. It was closed on Monday, so all we could do was look at the outside. Then it started raining pretty hard as we approached Cocoa. So by the time we got to the Space Center, it was raining, and there was one hour before they closed (and they don't admit new visitors at that point, just wait to kick out all the old ones).



Too bad. We look through nearby Titusville (colorful, small, *real* town), looking for another National Monument to get a stamp for the passport book. We didn't find it. So we hung up on the day, and went on into Disney World.

Tuesday June 17 - Sunday June 22: Disney World: See Vacation '08, Part 2.

Monday June 23: Florida North Coast: The time has finally come to leave Disney World and proceed on to Savannah. So we head back toward the Atlantic coast.

The plan is to first find a lighthouse near Smyrna, south of Daytona. It's well off the road, so we spend a good bit of time moving up towards Smyrna, close enough to see the lighthouse from a distance, but learn from a local that it's on a peninsula south of Daytona ("you can't get there from here"). We backtrack, get back on U.S. 1, and go through Daytona town. Since the way is not clear, and we've already lost a lot of time, we give up on the lighthouse, and proceed to Ormond Beach.

Now, my grandfather told us *his* father, Edwin Munroe Ormand, homesteaded in Rocky, Oklahoma, where he was born, and before that was a cowboy in Texas, but originally came from where *his* father (my great-great-grandfather) had a farm in

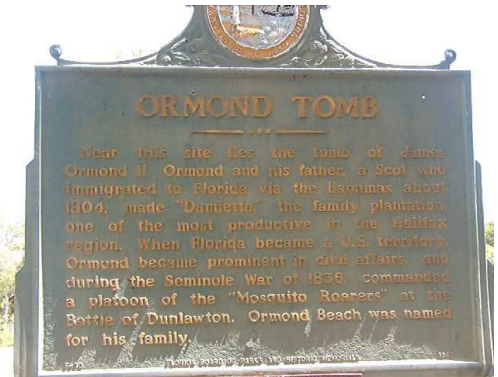
Rankin County, Mississippi. That's as far back as "reliable" testimony can take it. My grandfather also suggested that the family came from Florida, from James Ormond, but I don't think this comes with good confidence. However, in the notion that we *might*, we visit Ormond Beach - since we're there.



We stop at the beach itself for a moment. Similar to Miami, the water is warm, almost no surf, cool sand. But Miami had a steep beach. This shallow beach, particularly at low tide, is broad and hard - an ideal place for furiously driving the automobiles of the 1800s. Auto racing was born at Ormond Beach, even if Daytona, just a bit south, became famous for it.



Deep in the thick forest is the Ormond State Park.

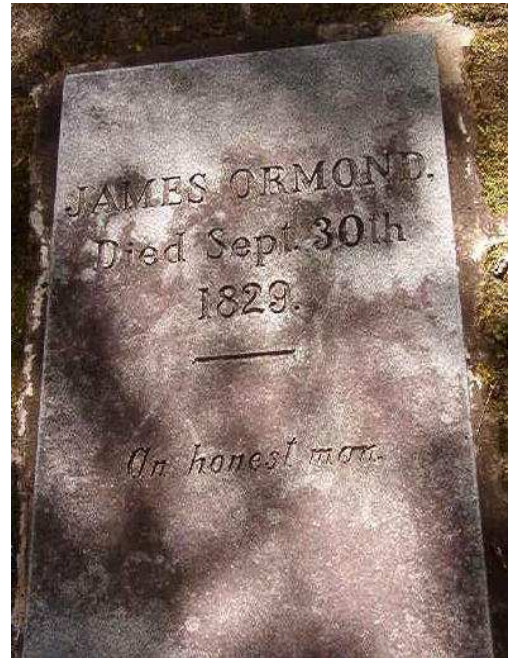


Ormond and the "Damietta" plantation were the focus for the area from before statehood.



The tomb itself. Grave, really. No explanation if this was part of the plantation or not. In fact, most locals weren't even aware that the "Ormond" part of their town referred to a big plantation.

This oak tree was also on the plantation, and James Ormond appreciated it. It was huge and ancient when he visited it over 200 years ago!



Ancestor or not? Unless Charity or Faith undertake a geneological research, we will never know. Or care too much, but it is interesting...



We get back to Route 1, and almost immediately find ourselves in St. Augustine. The oldest (European) settlement in North America. Originally Spanish, the English took it over, and eventually the Americans. The Castillo was used as a port defense fortress by all three powers. The walls are built of "coquina", apparently with lots of coral in it. This material has the virtue that it doesn't shatter, but "swallows" cannonballs. The Spaniards successfully held out against an English siege in the early 1700s.



True to form, the most interesting sights came at the end of the day. The Castillo would close in 45 minutes! Also we discovered that the Golden Eagle Pass, which we had bought at Saguaro National Monument last year in anticipation of *this* trip, and which we left at home and got Jeremiah to FedEx to us... had already expired! So we got another.

At the point of the redoubt overlooking the bay. There was a sentry box at all four points; this one is enhanced with a structure for signalling to forces across the bay. Period artillery pieces are all over the deck.



Jerri is across the yard. Two sisters are at the foot of the stairs to the left. In the corner is a large well. All around the periphery are doors to the casement chambers. Imagine 1500 townpeople packed into this yard for two months when St. Augustine was under English siege! The rangers are chasing people out now; time to go.

So we go, across the bay, over the tremendous drawbridge, and to the lighthouse.



We get there at about an hour to closing. Finally, a lighthouse we get to go *inside*!

Lots of stairs.



Too many for mommy. That's her at the bottom. Actually, I went up a stone spiral staircase in a monument at Groton, Connecticut, and it was a lot more agonizing that this one, and not nearly so tall. I think mommy might could have done this.

View from the top. On some of the semicircular landings, they had exhibits; in one of these exhibits, they had the story of a lighthouse keeper's children experimenting with parachutes and the family cat. The cat survived, but didn't come back to the house for a few months!



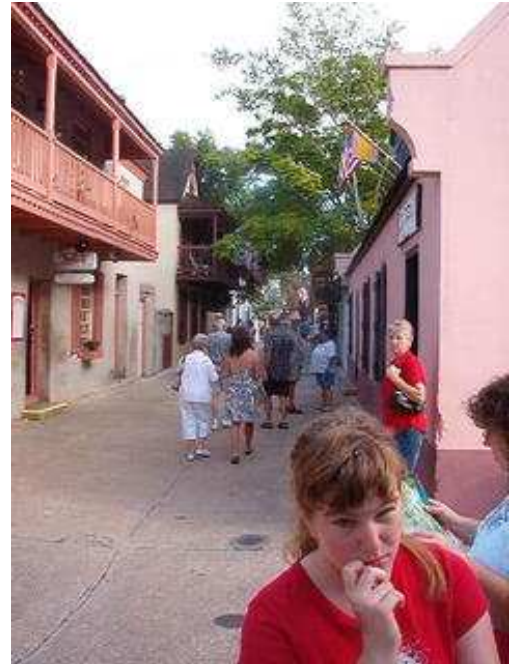
The original lighthouse in this location was originally a Spanish watchtower (part of the original defenses) which was converted to a lighthouse by the Americans. It was very old, and very near the sea, so it ended up crumbling away, and America had to build this one. Supposedly you can see the remnants of the old one from the top, but it seems you have to know where to look and what you are seeing.

Now St. Augustine is supposedly (due to its Spanish origins) the oldest city in North America. The Castillo was built after pirates had sacked and burned the town several times. We visited the "old town" after 6:00, when nearly everything was already closed.



The first line of defense for the city was a low wall with redoubts (cubes, or "Cubos") for cannon. This was the gate to the city (from the north). I guess this sort of structure was only good for giving the townpeople a bit of time to make it to the Castillo in the face of an invader, since it seems a bit ineffective.

The old Spanish Quarter is supposedly where the oldest part of town was, and is now "preserved" as a tourist attraction. Here's a view of the street with a Faith annoyed by her shutterbug dad.



"Oldest wooden schoolhouse" (yay). Sign on side says "Diploma free with tuition".

I wonder how many houses in America claim to be "oldest". This one in the oldest town in America may have the best claim. This building is not in Old Town, but on the far south side of St. Augustine.





Marks the beginning of the Camino Real, which supposedly runs from here (capital of Spanish Florida) to San Diego (capital of Spanish California). There was a "real" (U.S.) zero mile marker for Route 1 in Key West. This is a bit more impressive, if somewhat less official.

At this time, everything really *is* closed, so there's nothing to detain us from the road. St. Augustine is really a tourist town, with a lovely antebellum town square, narrow streets, nice hotels, carriage rides, etc. Definitely worth more time than we got to spend on it.

As it is, it is late before we stop in Jacksonville for dinner, and the drive across the Georgia coast is an hour and a half. So it's pretty late before we get to Savannah and the end of our day.

On to Georgia: See Vacation '08 Part 3