

St. Augustine



(excerpts from *Palmetto Leaves* pages 214-222)

The book, Palmetto Leaves, was published in 1872. The author, Harriet Beecher Stowe, was living in Mandarin, Florida (near Jacksonville). In this excerpt, she describes St. Augustine in the late 1800's

Mandarin, May 30, 1872

As the only seaport city of any size in Florida, St. Augustine has many attractions. Those who must choose a Southern home, and who are so situated that they must remain through the whole summer in the home of their choice, could not do better than to choose St. Augustine. It is comparatively free from malarial fevers; and the sea-air tempers the oppressive heats of summer, so that they are

quite endurable. Sea-bathing can be practised in suitable bathing-houses; but the sharks make open sea-bathing dangerous.

If one comes expecting a fine view of the open ocean, however, one will be disappointed; for Anastasia Island—a long, low sand-bar—stretches its barren line across the whole view, giving only so much sea-prospect as can be afforded by the arm of the sea—about two miles wide—which washes the town. Little as this may seem of the

ocean, the town lies so flat and low, that, in stormy weather, the waves used to be driven up into it, so as to threaten its destruction. A sea-wall of solid granite masonry was deemed necessary to secure its safety, and has been erected by the United-States Government. This wall affords a favorite promenade to the inhabitants, who there enjoy good footing and sea-breezes.

We were visiting in a house which is a model for a hot climate. A wide, cool hall runs through the centre; and wide verandas, both above and below, go around the whole four sides. From these we could look down at our leisure into the foliage of a row of *Magnolia grandiflora*, now in blossom. Ivy, honey-suckles, manrundia, and a host of other climbing-plants, make a bower of these outside corridors of the house. The calla-lilies blossom almost daily in shaded spots; and beds of fragrant blue violets are never without flowers.

The secret of gardening well here is to get things that love the sun. Plants that come originally from hot regions, and that rejoice the hotter it grows, are those to be sought for. The date-palm has many beautiful specimens in the gardens of St. Augustine. A date-palm, at near view, is as quaint and peculiar a specimen of Nature as one can imagine. Its trunk seems built up of great scales, in which ferns and vines root themselves, and twine and ramble, and hang in festoons. Above, the leaves, thirty feet long, fall in a feathery arch, and

in the centre, like the waters of a fountain, shoot up bright, yellow, drooping branches that look like coral. These are the flower-stalks. The fruit, in this climate, does not ripen so as to be good for any thing.

One very pretty feature of the houses here struck me agreeably. There is oftentimes a sort of shaded walk under half the house, opening upon the garden. You go up a dusty street, and stand at a door, which you expect will open into a hall. It opens, and a garden full of flowers and trees meets your view. The surprise is delightful. In one garden that we visited we saw a century-plant in bud. The stalk was nineteen feet high; and the blossoms seemed to promise to be similar to those of the yucca. The leaves are like the aloe, only longer, and twisted and contorted in a strange, weird fashion.

Horse-drawn railroad to St. Augustine

