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The history of Florida turpentine camps

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The collection of turpentine, also known by its more formal name "Naval Stores," started during the Colonial Era. During this time England needed turpentine to free itself from foreign trade, and England's colonies provided this necessary material.

The naval stores industry developed along the entire east coast of the United States. Initially, small farmers, supplementing their farm earnings, conducted turpentine. The primary products of this industry were tar and pitch -- both needed to seal ships.

In the 1830s, the distillation process was improved and new products were developed. By the 1840s, the increased demand for naval stores in the United States made the process attractive to large southern plantation owners.

The use of slave labor expanded the naval stores industry throughout the south. Large areas in North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia were put into turpentine production. Next to cotton and rice, turpentine became one of the South's greatest exports. Slaves were organized into small camps and assigned sections of trees to work. Once trees in the section had been worked and died, the trees were cut to board. This pattern continued until the Civil War, when abolition of slavery forced changes in the turpentine industry.

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No longer forced to work, many former slaves practiced subsistence farming and took jobs in the turpentine camps to supplement their incomes. Over time, this led to the development of African-American communities within the turpentine camps. Large camps could have as many as 100 workers. The workers and their families would live at, or near, a main camp.

Over time, the extensive production of turpentine in the Carolinas and Georgia led to the destruction of the pine forests. Seeking new virgin timber, the industry turned south into Florida with its vast pine forests. This southward movement occurred in the 1900s. During this time the demand for labor led Florida to lease prisoners to the turpentine companies. Approximately 10 percent of the force in Florida was comprised of convict forced labor.

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In the 1900s, the average worker in the turpentine camps relied on the company for most of his goods and services. The camp provided small shacks or shanties for the workers and their families. In addition to housing, the worker was paid monthly. In the early 1900s, the average wage was based on the amount of trees worked. Workers could earn \$15-25 a month; however, in many camps the pay was often in the form of specie, scrip, or tokens usable in the company stores.

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By 1910, there were five working turpentine camps in Manatee County (Sarasota County 1921). Near Fruitville was the Hall and Cheney Camp. The R.T. Hall & Company Prison Camp was near Sandy and the Williams Camp was near Venice. The Hall and Harrison Camp was west of Cow Pen Slough, and there was an unnamed camp in the present Carlton Preserve area. Of these five camps, three are known to have used convict labor in addition to their paid workforce to harvest gum.

In the 1920s, many of the turpentine camps were closing. The trees had been in production for ten years and the camps were being converted into timber mills. In 1923, the state prohibited the practice of leasing convict labor to private companies. This had a direct impact on at least three of the camps in Sarasota County and raised the cost of production.

In the 1930s, two new camps were created at Sidell and Bee Ridge. Both camps provided housing and a commissary for the workers and their families. By the 1940s, production was in decline and by 1951 both camps were closed.

Information for this article was obtained from C.B. Butler's "Treasures of the Longleaf Pines: Naval Stores and B.W. Burger's "1991 Archaeological Investigations of the Turpentine Camp No.2 site.

-- Dan Hughes archaeologist

For additional information on this subject or another relating to Sarasota County's history, call 861-1180. The History Center is located at 701 N. Tamiami Trail, Sarasota, FL 34236.

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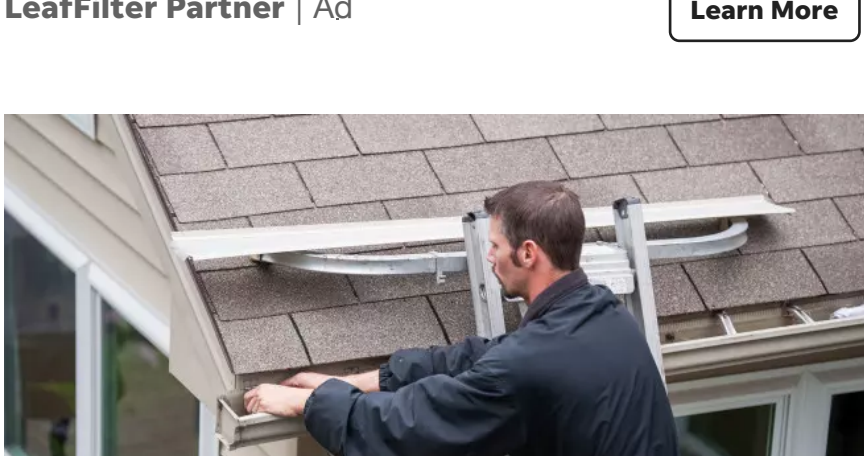
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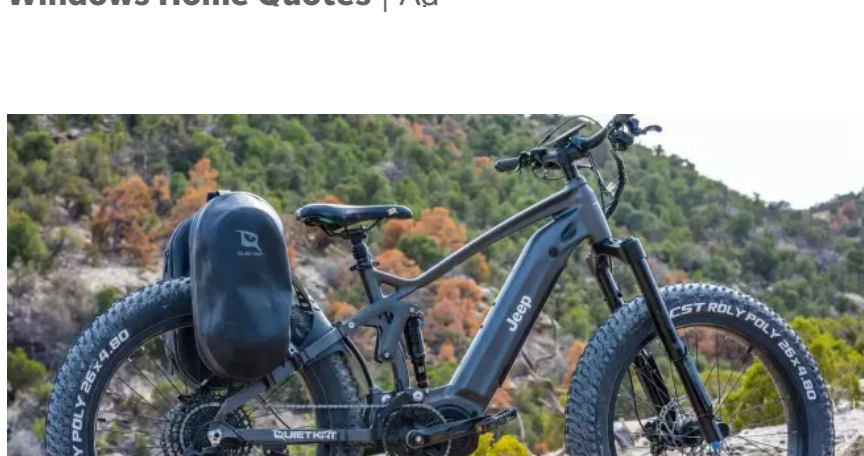
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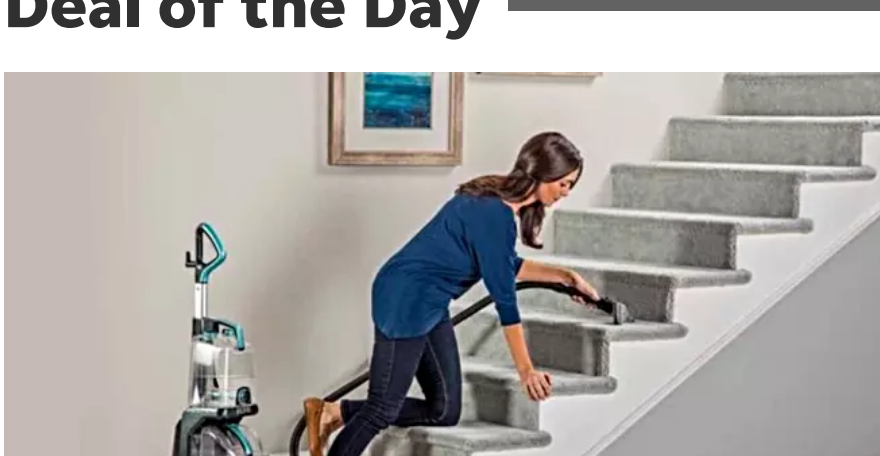


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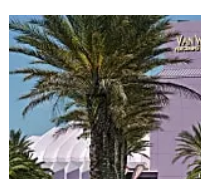
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