A Landscape of Labor
Tallahassee and the Persistence of Urban Memory

ARLEEN PABON
Florida A&M University

INTRODUCTION

Cities, like humans, are the product of memories. Urban memory parallels our own: it defies quantifiable time and persists for a long time, on many occasions, unconsciously. Many European cities evidence this defiant persistence. Dozens of architectural and urban artifacts developed within physical and spiritual constraints imposed by both time and tradition. The Piazza Navona in Rome, the polygonal avenues in Barcelona, the Campo in Siena, the Ringstrasse in Vienna, to name a few, confirm the cunning ways the past imposes itself upon the present.[1] The mnemonic quality inherent to urban centers never ceases to amaze those who pause to hear the silent commands of what was.

The phenomenon is also present in America and has been instrumental in the forging of the capital of the state of Florida: Tallahassee. To this day, urban patterns in this fair city are dictated not by the memory of Roman or Medieval architectural artifacts but by the quintessential 19th century invention, the railroad[2] and the architectural typology that serviced it, the train station. The railroad – even when described as: "The very worst that has been built in the entire world,"[3] as Tallahassee's once was – profoundly impacted many American cities. In fact, some scholars contend that the nation-wide 1877 railroad uprisings were due to the dislocation intraurban railroad transportation caused upon traditional urban fabric.[4] It probably comes as no surprise that the cause of so much social upheaval would also have a profound impact upon urban patterns.

What is also characteristic to Tallahassee is the added layer of cultural connotation vested upon its train station and the two iron lines that were its *raison d'être*. After the 1890s, the intersection created by these two artifacts was consciously interpreted and forcibly used to carve a divide that segregated people on the basis of skin color.

Tallahassee's most powerful urban memory echoes an urban arrangement imposed by the white minority during the late 19th century and early 20th century in order to contain the landscape of black labor that evolved around its train station. It is fascinating to analyze how recent urban renewal proposals honor and perpetuate, one would hope unconsciously, this pattern of oppression that has now entered the third century of its existence.

A BINARY OF OPPOSITES

The 19th century sketch "Tallahassee from the south" by James E Taylor depicts an elegantly dressed couple standing on uninhabited semi-wild ground looking towards the city.[5] (See Figure #1.) This somewhat fanciful drawing of the capital city vividly renders one of the most powerful and lasting Western cultural oppositions: the one embodied by the urban/suburbia binary. The "north" is presented as a civilized locus, planted with fruitful and leafy trees, spectacularly illuminated while shadows settle upon the forsaken "south," characterized by desiccated and moss-draped trees. No one inhabits this place: the only use humans have for it is as an inspiration point of sorts from where the civilized nucleus can be enjoyed in all its glory.

The only thing these two sectors have in common is a man-made boundary: the railroad track. The message, notwithstanding Victorian stylistic drawing techniques, is compellingly clear: the land south of the tracks is the "other." The drawing, therefore, also demonstrates that the railroad is invested with a metaphorical role. The track is the frontier not just between two opposites but between a "right" and a "wrong" side of the city.

The original urban configuration generated during the 1820s, reflective of Enlightenment theoretical ideas, presents no "north" or "south," no "right" or "wrong" side for the city, was conceived as one urban organism. (See Figure #2.) In fact, the

area south of the urbanized core was considered part of the city and, as such, was reserved for future development. It is also known that, prior to the Civil War, important prosperous plantations and small commercial concerns were sited on the moss-draped abandoned tracts depicted by Taylor.[6] In addition, Bel Air was also located south of the city. This was the place where the locals spent their summers and sought protection from the plagues that occasionally visited the city: from malaria to the invading foe during the Civil War. What happened that changed this perspective of one city into a binary of opposites?

Tallahassee's intraurban binary emerged as a result of the landscape of black labor anchored by the 19th century paradigmatic architectural typology: the train station-cum-depot. For a short period after the Civil War, the railroad was one of the few places blacks could work without many of the racial constraints faced in other fields. In fact, until the early 1880's, "blacks held most of the high-paying [railroad] jobs"[7] in Florida. As a result, the train station suffered a transformation: from a transitory portal it became an epicenter of black labor.

As the railroad grew in exponential fashion, so did the neighborhood around the train station. As early as 1860, the area was described as: "... home to a myriad of industrial uses, including steam saws, grist mills, foundries, lumber yards, and a brick yard."[8] (See Figure #3.) In order to handle the growth, the northern portion of the station and the tracks was platted during the early 1880s.[9] The area, known as "All Saints,"[10] was subdivided into commercial, industrial and residential uses. Dozens of black families settled here, close to their source of income. There was still no binary in place, therefore, the city was perceived as one totality.

The Reconstruction Period was to change this holistic urban approach. Slowly but surely the oxymoronic "separate but equal" rule of law imprinted itself upon urban policies, just as it appended itself to all other spheres including the labor one. The most relevant effect was felt when railroad brotherhoods came into existence. Since blacks were refused membership, they were prohibited to continue working as: "conductors, engineers, firemen, and trainmen."[11] By the 1890s, they were relegated to all but the lowest paying jobs. As a direct result, their newly found social standing plummeted. It was around this time that the city decided to intersect segregation with urban policies and the binary emerged. There would now be a right and a wrong side to the tracks.

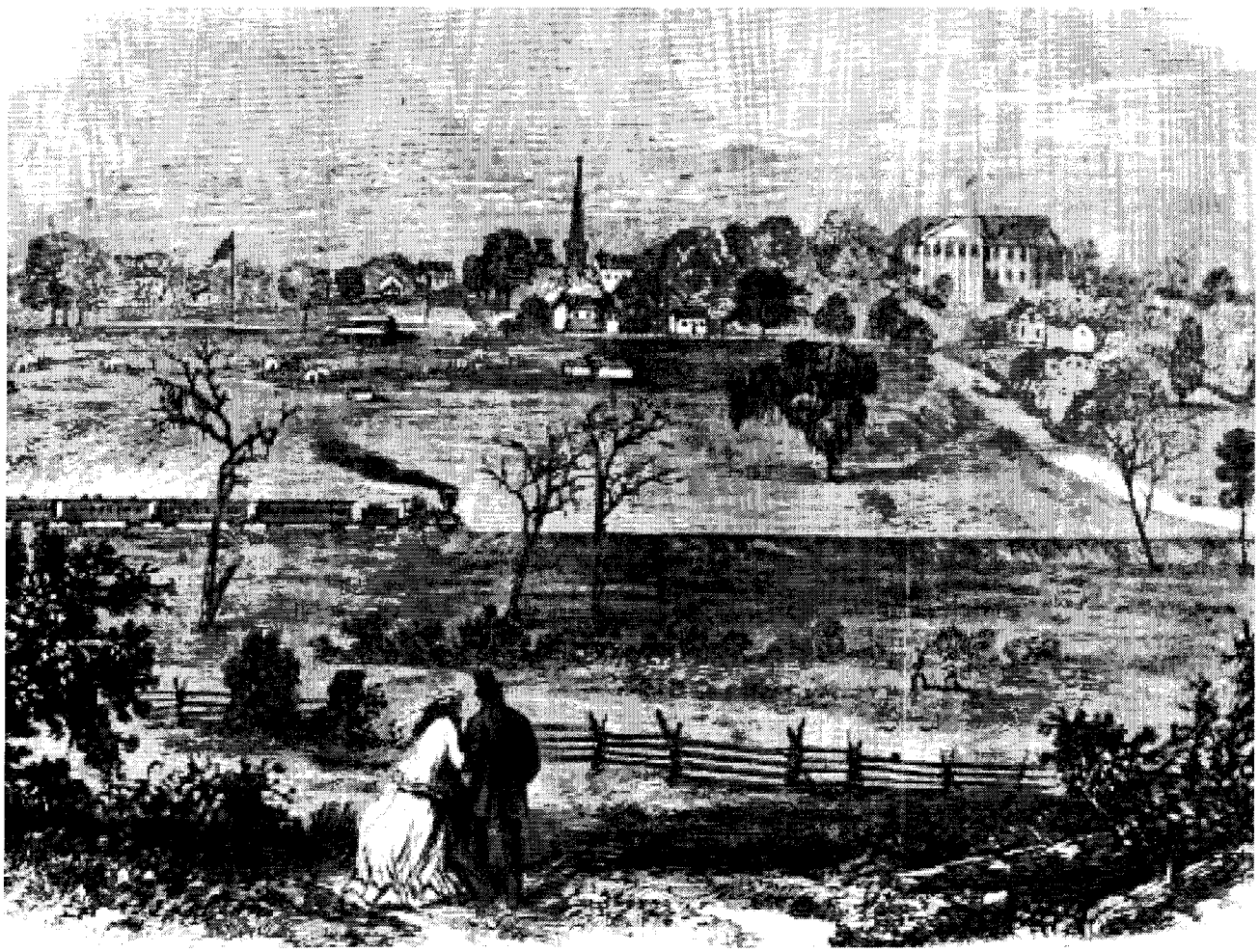

Fig. 1. "Tallahassee from the south ..." by James E Taylor, c 1870's-1880's. Florida Memory Project: Florida Photographic Archives.

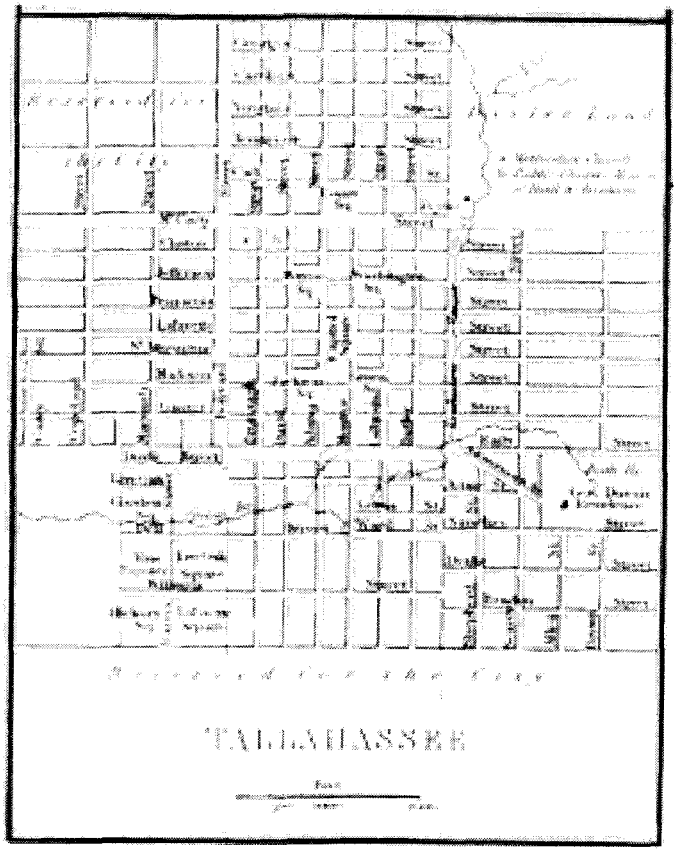

Fig. 2. Tallahassee's original urban organization. Florida Memory Project: Florida Photographic Archives.

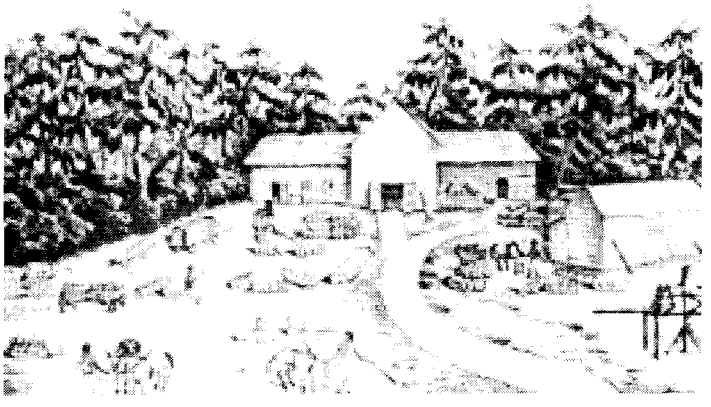

Fig. 3. Tallahassee depot area during the 1850's. Florida Memory Project: Florida Photographic Archives.

The first step towards the concretization of the Tallahassee binary was the construction of a new black workers area, the Stearns Moseley Neighborhood,[12] on the south side of the tracks. The second measure was more dramatic: the move of the Normal College for Colored Students from its original location north of the tracks to its present southern locale. It is instructive to analyze this relocation in order to better understand the social and urban motivations behind it.

The College, present day Florida A&M University, was founded in 1887. The original site was northwest of the tracks, a few blocks away from the rain station. As a result, in a matter of a few years, the black enclave within town grew. It now included the area around the new campus and the landscape of labor around the train station. Even though the site was originally chosen by the city authorities, they soon realized the new location was unacceptable to the social forces intent on clear racial demarcations.

In 1890, the college was mandated to abandon its newly built Grecian building. Notwithstanding the praise President Tucker lavished on the new "spacious and rustic" site[13] several facts stand out. First, the original locale was as spacious and rustic as the new one. Second, it took several years to acquire the new property for the owners, who at the time were living in Canada, were not intent on selling.[14] Third, at a time of great scarcity, the abandonment of a newly constructed building further evidences that the move was capricious. The final irony is that the same place judged inadequate for an embryonic university (FAMU) now nestles a much larger university (FSU).

FAMU was moved to the south of the tracks for the same reason the Stearns Mosley neighborhood was built here. By the 1890s, the train track was an instrument used for racial segregation, demarcating the "right" from the "wrong side" of town. The thin iron lines were a convenient icon, a literal delineation of the desire of a few to contain many. A third artifact completed the racial containment agenda. In 1905, a new building was constructed at the station. (See Figure #4.) By now, the area was not only the epicenter of a landscape of black labor but also served as the portal for hundreds of black college students. It is instructive to analyze an 1891 newspaper article on why a new station building was needed. One of the key issues was that passengers had to walk: "surrounded by hungry company of ragged and greasy looking negro hackmen."[15] Since the old building made no provision for "white and colored waiting rooms,"[16] a new structure was needed to maintain segregation and handle the influx of blacks from landscape of labor and the student campus.

In this manner, the parallel iron lines and their station became the outspoken reminder of a new artificial urban condition. These man-made artifacts now divided one city into two different portions and separated its citizens on the basis of their skin color. The railroad was Tallahassee's most authoritative instrument in enforcing the South's infamous segregation policies. While the black landscape of labor evolved in a spontaneous manner, the segregation model used to contain it, as well as the campus, was an act of cultural appropriation

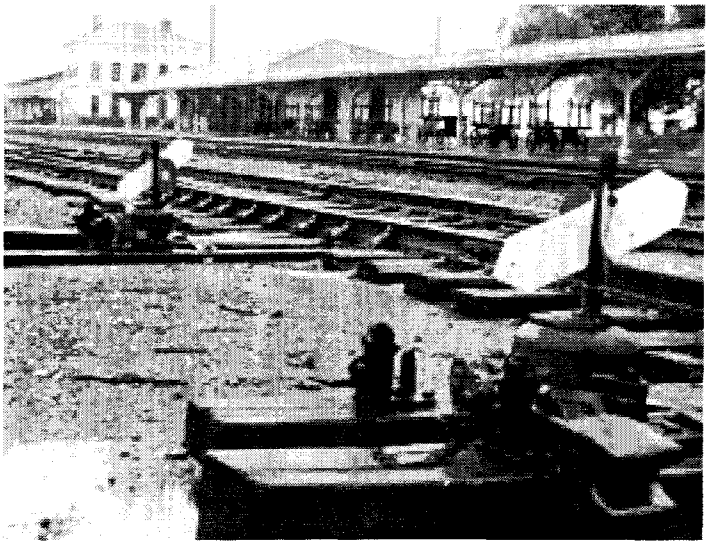

Fig. 4. Tallahassee train station and depot area from the south. The two stories building on the back is date to the 1850's-1880's while the one in front was constructed in 1905. Florida Memory Project: Florida Photographic Archives.

embedded in Tallahassee's urban memory. Its persistence is so insidious that it still dictates urban development.

PERSISTENT MEMORIES

When the two most recent urban renewal proposals are analyzed, the past silently roars. Both projects are based on the premise that there is indeed an inherent difference between the north and the south sides of the tracks. As a result, the north – the civilized locus – needs formal protection from the south. Just as Taylor depicted the "south" as an empty place, characterized by its barrenness, contemporary projects equate FAMU with the 19th century desolate landscape, in spite of the fact that much relevant social and cultural activity now takes place south of the tracks.

This is clearly evident in how the Gaines Street Corridor Project tantalizingly stops on its tracks (no pun intended) as it approaches the train station area, even though the rehabilitation of this area was mandated. (See Figure #5.) The presence of FAMU, a most relevant "client" of this proposal and a key factor in the eventual success of the scheme, is not considered at all. The proposal interprets the train station and the railroad lines as a boundary that divides two completely different urban landscapes. Pictorial rendering further emphasizes this separation in the use of a dramatic blue streak inserted in the drawings, meant to represent an almost desiccated mangrove area. If language does indeed shape thought, here is an example of how drawing, our architectural idiom, unconsciously enforces separation and distance.

A second urban renewal project honors and strengthens the man-made frontier by creating a literal gap between the two areas of the city. The Lineal Park Project reinforces the dissection not only by widening the divide and placing a road along the southern side of the train tracks but by sinking the pedestrian corridor proposed. Rather that treat the 19th century scar, radical surgery is applied, isolating the two portions by creating a moat between them.

Both projects, notwithstanding their possible intrinsic merits, still pay homage to a boundary that is no more, either in terms of commercial or social relevance. As is the case with many Floridian cities, the relationship between the urban core and the railroad is tenuous, at best. The persistence of this particular urban memory, however, is alive and well. It is responsible for the design proposals presented here and for planning strategies that continuously push north rather than towards the beautiful vacant southern tracts of land. In Tallahassee, we rather live in Georgia than south of the tracks.

Segregation is illegal. However, when urban policies accept this rule of the past over the present it tolerates and gives credence to 19th century prejudices. Since the idea that there are two Tallahassees that need not interact is honored, the holistic integration of town is evaded. The persistence of urban memory preserves a binary of opposites and allows "two streaks of rust," as they were once described, not only to assume a larger than life personality, *alla* Berlin Wall, but also to be arbiters of the "right" and "wrong" sides of town. In this manner, urban and architectural renewal ideas establish an exclusionary discourse that continues a pattern of racial oppression established three centuries ago.

CONCLUSION

The research leading to this paper was the result of FAMU's interest in rehabilitating the 1905 train station in order to reinforce the University's presence within the Gaines Street Corridor proposal. Characteristically, only the earlier building is listed in the National Register of Historic Places. The 1905 one was found to be culturally non significant. Interpreted exclusively from an architectural vantage point it failed to meet the established criteria. No consideration was given to its role as an anchor of a landscape of black labor, as an icon of days gone by when people were forced to wait in different rooms depending on their skin color, or as the portal to the second oldest and only historically black university of the state. Only a few bothersome professors from the only School of Architecture in the city, located on the "wrong" side of the tracks, contest the forced urban propositions presented as solutions.

How, why, and for whom is Tallahassee to preserve a landscape and a building that are iconic of the evils intrinsic to segregation? How do we preserve the railroad's powerful

historic resonance even though it is no longer the protagonist of daily life? How are urban policies to deal with the "sacramentalized" perception of the railroad lines that has become larger than life and suffocate healthy urban growth? Architects, preservationists, urban planners, and politicians, among others, need to initiate a new and creative dialogue with the past. The past is never totally gone, it is always present within our cities. Complex social, urban and architectural paradoxes such as these can only be tackled by means of much thought and creative interpretation and interface. Only in this manner will modernity and its peculiar needs be served while preserving what was for what will be.

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NOTES

[1] The Piazza Navona is located where an old Roman circus once stood, while the avenues surrounding the Plaça de Catalunya in Barcelona, known as *rondas*, substitute the Roman *pomerium*. The *Ringstrasse* occupies the area of the Medieval defensive circuit.

[2] The original "train track" service was provided to Tallahassee by the Leon Railway Company starting in 1831. The name "train" is given vicariously, for the first "trains" were really wooden boxes aligned with seats pulled by mules along a "long thin iron strap nailed to a wooden track." B H Groene, *Ante-Bellum Tallahassee* (Tallahassee, Florida: Rose Printing Company, 1971), p 84.

[3] The description was made by Count Costeneau's, an aristocrat 19th century resident of Tallahassee. G W Pettengill Jr, *Bulletin No 86 The Story of the Florida Railroads 1834-1903* (Boston: The Railway & Locomotive Historical Society, Inc, 1952), pp 14-15.

[4] David O Stowell, *Streets, Railroad and the Great Strike of 1877* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1999) is an exponent of this theory.

[5] B H Groene, *Ante-Bellum Tallahassee*, illustrations. Different authors suggest different dates for the drawing. In spite of the fact that it was used in the above-mentioned book dedicated to *ante-bellum* Tallahassee, the sense of desolation depicted in the "south" and the dress fashions tend to support a date of 1870's or 1880's.

[6] One of these was *Highwood*, territorial governor W P Duval slave plantation, where Florida A&M University now stands. L W Nayland, *Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University: A Centennial History (1887-1987)* (Tallahassee, Florida: The Florida A&M University Foundation, Inc. 1987). Other sources

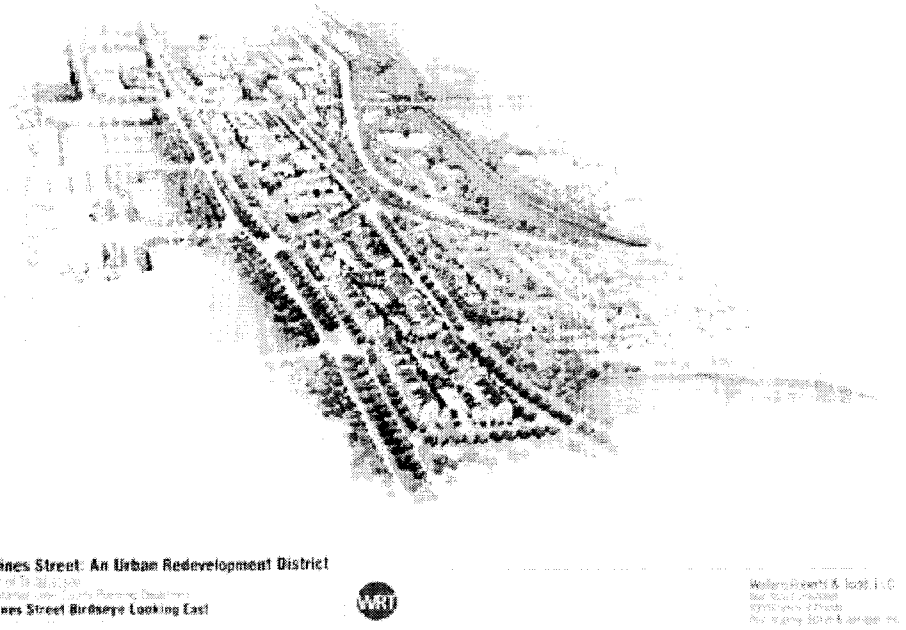

Fig. 5. Gaines Street Corridor Proposal. Tallahassee, Florida.

mention that Governor Duval's plantation was located within the ruins of the old mission of Purificacin de la Tama, near the Cascade.

[7] "Florida's Historic Railroad Resources," National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form, 2001, p E-27.

[8] 1000 Friends of Florida *et al*, "The Preservation of the Historic Resources in the Gaines Street Corridor Prepared for the Tallahassee-Leon County Planning Department," 1999, p 2.

[9] *Ibid.*

[10] The area is known as "All Saints" due to the fact that its streets were named after saints. Instrumental to this effort was the owner of the land, George Walker, prominent stockholder in the local train venture.

[11] "Florida's Historic Railroad Resources," National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form, 2001, p E-27.

[12] The neighborhood was sited where an 1860's brick yard had been located.

[13] L W Nayland, *Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University: A Centennial History (1887-1987)*, p 20.

"With the newly found income for the college, it was much easier for the [University's] Board to accept the logic of [President] Tucker's argument that the institution should be relocated in a much more spacious and rural area.... By the end of the school year in May, 1891, it was able to announce that it had secured a permanent home at *Highwood*, the former mansion of Governor William P Duval, on a hilltop overlooking Tallahassee."

[14] *Ibid.* The owners at the time were James Smart Lockie and Mary Lockie.

[15] *Weekly Floridian*, December 19, 1891.

[16] In "Our New Depot," *The Weekly True Democrat*, Vol I, Friday October 27, 1905, Tallahassee, Florida, the interior of the new building is described in the following fashion:

The main waiting room, for whites, is 23(?) by 37 feet in size, heated by a large fireplace and will be completely furnished with settees and tables. At its western side are retiring and toilet rooms for both ladies and gentlemen, with every modern convenience.

Between the main room and a somewhat smaller room adjoining is the ticket office. The smaller room is a colored waiting room, equally well finished and furnished ...

The building was constructed by JH McKenzie.