

SAND MANSIONS

A Novel



NORMAN GILLILAND

SAND MANSIONS
A Novel

Norman Gilliland

NEMO Productions

Madison, Wisconsin

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places,
and incidents either are the product of the author's
imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance
to actual persons, living or dead, events or locales
is purely coincidental. A railroad track, a church, or a hotel may
have moved from its strictly historical place because this is a novel.

Published by NEMO Productions
P.O. Box 260079
Madison, WI 53726-0079

Copyright ©2005 by Norman Gilliland
All rights reserved. This book, or parts thereof, may not
be reproduced in any form without permission.
First Edition.

ISBN 0-9715093-1-X
LCCN 2004102208

Printed by Banta Corporation
Harrisonburg, Virginia
Cover: *Cracker Horse & Rider*

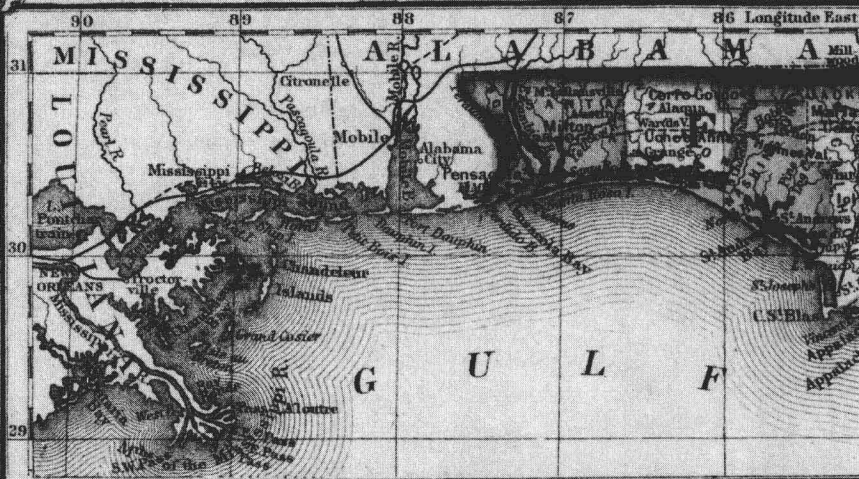
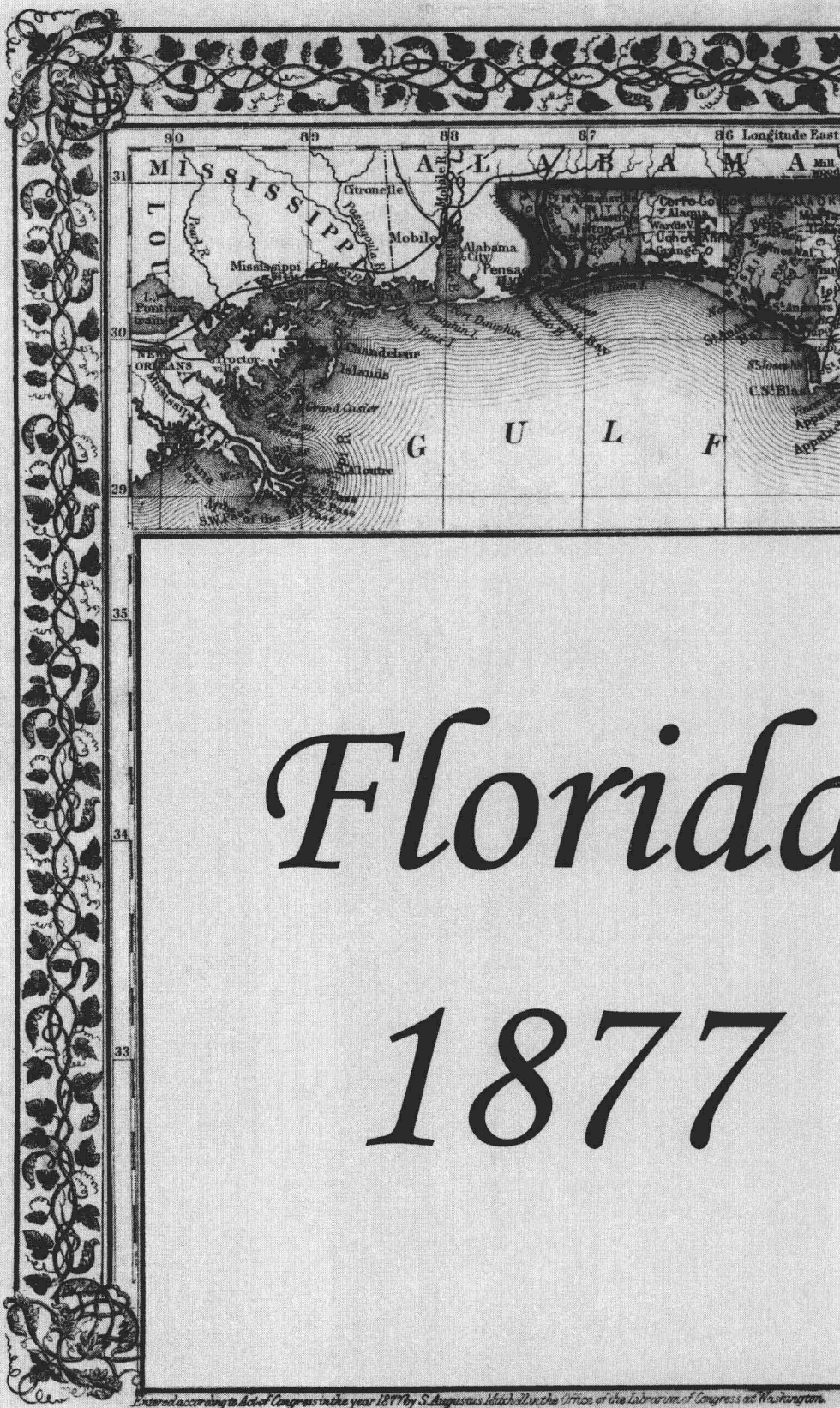
Maps courtesy of the Rucker Agee Map Collection at the
Birmingham Public Library in Birmingham, Alabama
Photos courtesy the Matheson Museum, Gainesville, Florida

Attention Organizations and Educational Institutions:
Quantity discounts are available on bulk purchases of this book for
educational purposes and fund raising.
For information, please call NEMO Productions at (608) 833-0988.

SAND MANSIONS

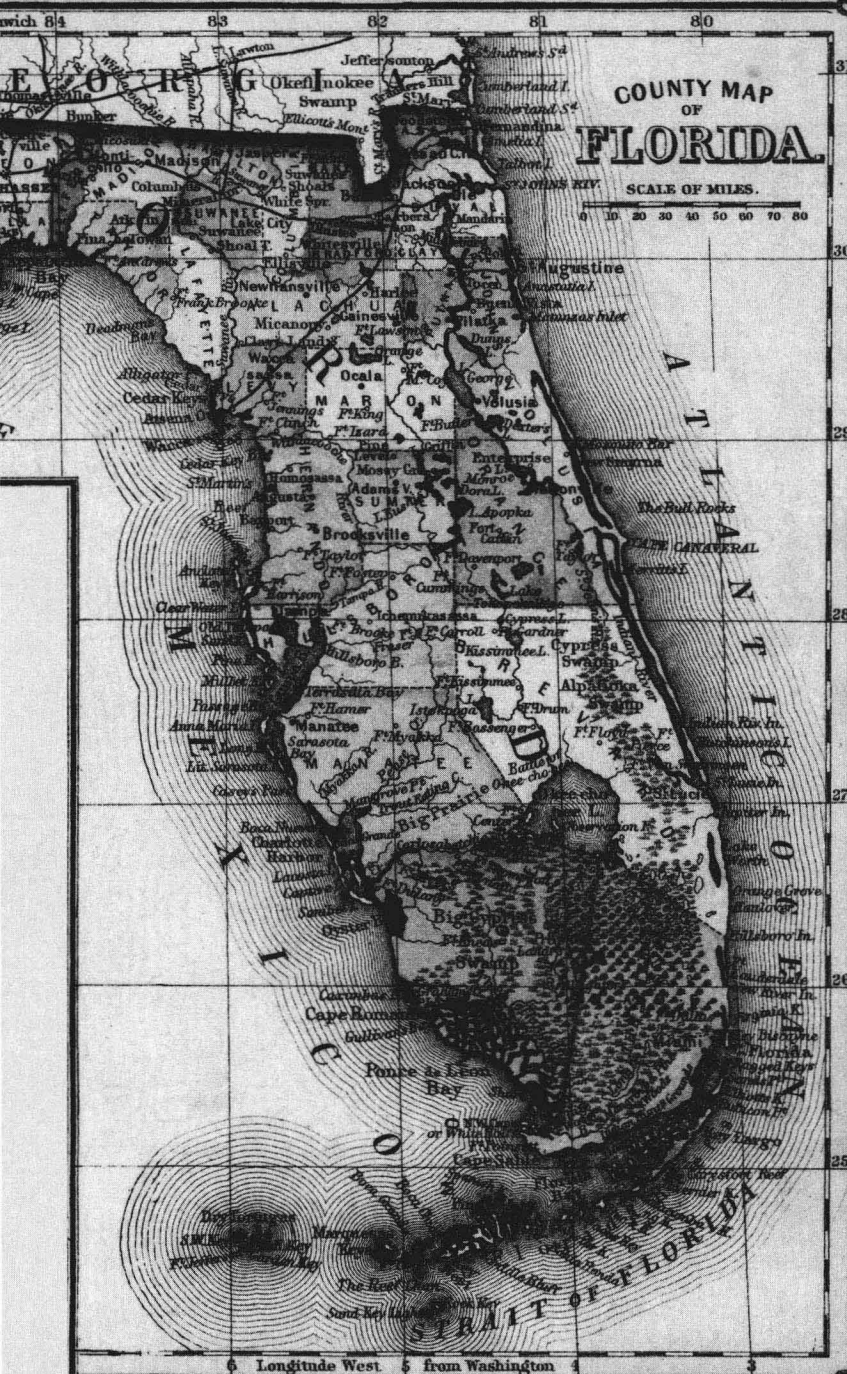
For Terry Cassel

*Once upon a time,
fellow traveler on the King Payne*



Florida

1877



6 Longitude West 5 from Washington 4 3

SAND MANSIONS

Prologue

September 17, 1929

BREATHING WAS THE OLD MAN'S ONLY BUSINESS NOW. The rise and fall of his chest was fitful beneath the sheet but his heart was steady and kept chugging along like the locomotive that punched its way up West Main Street. The doctor's visit was merely a courtesy, his deft motions with the stethoscope little more than a way of keeping his hands busy while he passed the time with the woman and her son.

"It sure was kind of you to take him in, Flora, after all that bad blood. I've always heard it was your daddy who put that mark on his forehead."

The gabled room was hot and close. The woman watched lightning flicker through the open window beside the bed. Distant and silent, it illuminated the lace on the broad collar of her dress and cast the intricate silhouettes of tall loblolly pines. "Daddy forgave him a long time ago—in a rather startling way," she said. She patted the shoulder of the boy beside her. "In fact, he and Rex got to be friends this summer."

The doctor packed his stethoscope into an overstuffed valise. The rattle in the old man's lungs was clear enough without it. "A person his age ought not to be roughing it like a kid. How long do you suppose he'd been camping down there in the Porters Quarters?"

Rex volunteered the information in a voice that squeaked and broke. "All summer, maybe longer." He went on, testing his words "I was down there busting bottles one Sunday morning and suddenly there he was, right behind me, sitting on a pine stump. Like to scared me out of my skin."

Flora frowned. "It took us a while to get that story since he was supposed to be in Sunday school at the time."

"We got along real good." Rex's voice was behaving now and he was eager to take advantage of it. "He told me all kinds of stories from the old days. I was itching for him to tell me more about the Little Giant."

The doctor had picked up a photograph on the bureau. Two bearded grinning old men holding a mackerel that hung almost to the ground. He set it down and turned toward the boy. "The Little Giant? He told you about *him*?"

Rex was fired up now. "Got so I'd head down there whenever I could. Cost

me a couple of whuppings but it was worth it.”

Flora touched the wave in her new permanent. “Dr. Willis doesn’t need to hear about all that.”

The doctor glanced toward the window. “That Ford of yours fits into the old summer kitchen like a hand in a glove, doesn’t it?”

Flora was glad for the change of subject. “Yes, but on days like this I wish I had the summer kitchen back.”

“We get some rain, we’ll all feel better. You’ve got the back yard so fixed up that I barely recognize it. When I was Rex’s age I spent a lot of time tearing around back there, mostly throwing pinecones at your mama as I recall, and I’ll tell you, she gave as good as she got, too. Pasted me real solid one time. Some of the boys and I had chased her out of the yard and after a while she came back and said real sweet, ‘Billy, I’ve got something for you’ and then she smacked one of those sharp green ones right there.” He pulled back his collar. “After more than fifty years, I’ve still got the mark from it.”

A swayback wooden horse lay beside the photograph. Flora set it on its feet. “Tell me more about my mother someday. There aren’t many people left who remember her.”

The doctor smiled. “Well, I can tell you this. She had her own way of seeing things and her own way of doing things. I don’t doubt she’d have her own way of *remembering* things too, if she were here.” He took a gold watch from his vest pocket and opened the cover. “I’ve let the time get away from me. I was due over at the Wards half an hour ago. Richard thinks he broke his wrist trying to crank up that new Packard he bought in Jacksonville. With a self-starter, I don’t know how. You’d think a person who can make so much money would have more sense. Tell you what though. When I come back I’ll tell you a story or two and you can tell me why your daddy came down here from Missouri in the first place. He always struck me as kind of a lone soul and he seemed to get quiet whenever that question came up.”

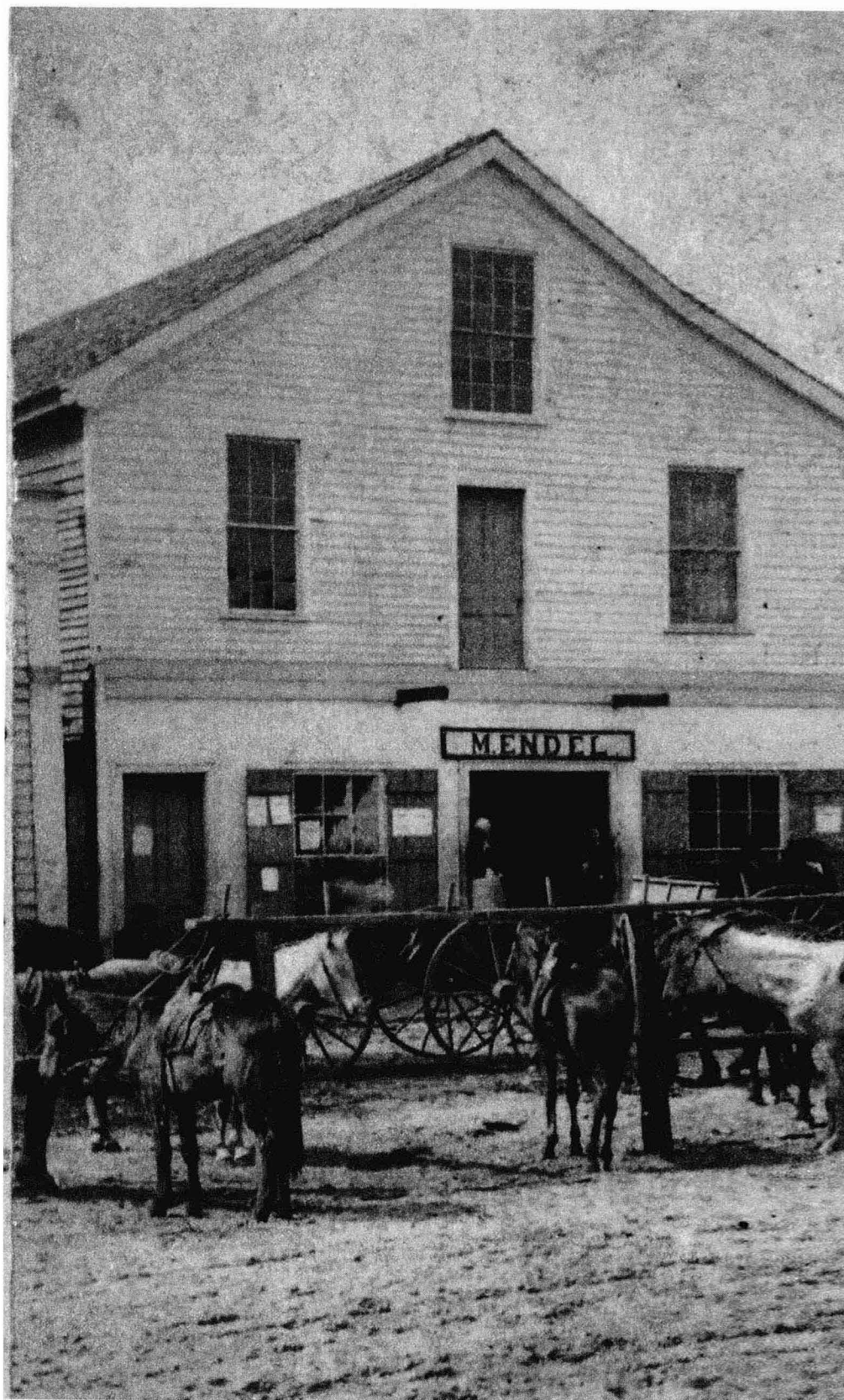
The old man gasped and coughed and rose off the pillow. As Dr. Willis moved toward him he settled back down without waking up. Something was loose in his lungs.

“Could be pneumonia setting in,” the doctor said. “They call it the old man’s friend, you know. Well, I’ll stop by around suppertime for the next day or so. In the meantime, if anything drastic occurs, call me.”

Flora was still thinking about her father. “After more than fifty years, I guess it would be all right to tell you. He left Missouri for the same reason he eventually went back. Because he *had* to.”

As they left the room the old man took in a noisy breath and pushed it out through dry lips.

Part I
Renegades
1876-1877





Chapter 1

LARRABEE LEANED LOW OVER THE SORREL MARE'S NECK, listening to her labored breathing, hoping that she would make it to the vast brown river that sparkled below. The horse was nearly spent. Spurring did little good. The man closing in on him was riding a fresher mount. They had exchanged shots half a mile back, but Larrabee's hand had been unsteady and, twisted around in the saddle while galloping on an uncertain road, he had fired far wide of the mark. The other's bullet had come much closer, close enough that Larrabee heard it hiss as it passed. That one shot had made him suddenly philosophical about life and death and convinced him that robbing banks was an undesirable way of passing from one to the other. But the die was cast. The man pressing him was intent on killing him.

He had little knowledge of this part of Missouri and less of jurisdiction, but he knew that this was the Mississippi he was breaking for and he believed that once he crossed it he'd be free of his pursuer.

Clods flying, the man was catching up. He fired twice. Larrabee felt the sorrel buckle beneath him, but she kept going.

Suddenly he was more angry than afraid. He turned and fired three more shots. The first exploded from the gun before he had finished raising the heavy .45. The second was a proper aim-and-squeeze, and the third went off before he saw through the smoke that the man had gone down. He stared stupidly for a moment at the empty saddle, then came to his senses and spurred the sorrel for all she was worth, down to the rushing Mississippi.

The road was muddy from a storm the night before, and as he picked his way down a treeless hill, he could see that the rain-gorged river was carrying snags capable of gutting any boat that blundered into them. The ferry was still on the Missouri side but the men on it quickly threw off their lines as Larrabee rode toward them. It was a miserable little affair, a teamboat, hardly more than an oversized raft enclosed in a rail. Crowding one end was a stack of crates stuffed with chickens. Occupying most of the deck were two teams of mules circling a capstan, and Larrabee was hard put to figure out how the contraption was supposed to get him to safety, but he wasn't about to let it get

away. He pressed the sorrel forward, bracing himself all the while for another shot from behind.

One of the two ferrymen was driving the team. He was stout and ruddy faced and wore an infantry cap faded beyond affiliation, blue or gray. The other man was dark and bearded and worked in the shade of a black slouch hat. He hauled on the long tiller, moving the boat out into the water.

Larrabee gave a whoop, loped the sorrel onto the plank pier, and jumped the widening gap to the ferry. The sorrel cleared the rail and came down hard on the deck, breaking open a crate of Rhode Island Reds and throwing the ferry into chaos. Horse and mules collided with the capstan and each other and the twin stern wheels jerked to a stop, causing the ferry to surge crookedly. Half a dozen prize pullets squawked and flapped in outrage.

Larrabee vaulted out of the saddle, drew his gun, and took cover behind the winded sorrel as the ferry rocked against the current.

The gentlemen of the teamboat were unimpressed by the young desperado. Kicking a chicken aside, the teamster came toward Larrabee and told him to put the gun away or go to the bottom of the river with it.

Larrabee was looking back toward the landing, looking for the horseman to come over the hill, but no horseman came.

The helmsman craned his neck for a better view of the empty road and gave a long pull on the tiller. "Looks like you got him. You figger you killed him?"

Larrabee braced himself against the sweating sorrel in an effort to keep his knees from shaking.

"I don't know."

Several feathery passengers strutted among the mules, cackling their indignation.

The helmsman spat into the water and wiped his mouth on his sleeve. He adjusted his wide-brimmed hat. "Well, you don't get across this river without we take you and we can't hardly take you if you get us shot. So put it away like Pat told you." He shoved hard on the tiller and the ferry headed into the current for a moment and then started straight downstream. "Why was he after you?"

Larrabee continued to look back to the Missouri side. "I was trying to make a withdrawal at the bank."

The helmsman laughed, spat, and wiped his mouth again. "You and every other farmer's boy."

The team continued to turn the capstan even though the direction was still off. Low in the water a cottonwood tree came at them roots first.

The teamster turned his back on the nervous renegade. "You know, Bridger, it would serve him right if we was to take him right back to the Missouri side."

As the helmsman swung the ferry upstream, the cottonwood slid past them. "Well now Pat, back in Missouri this fine young feller just might get strung up—if he killed that man back there."