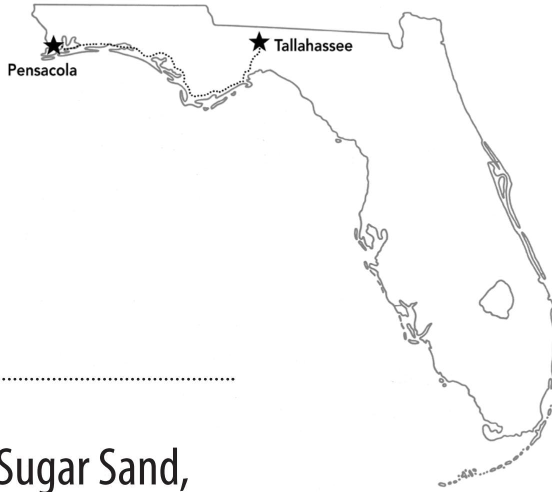

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Salty Oysters, Sugar Sand, and Royal Reds (US 98)

Here are one-street towns, quiet in the sunlight,
their weathered century-old houses still in use.

A Guide to the Southernmost State, 1939

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It is far too tempting to see Florida only in snippets of vacation. Every time I read another condescending account from an online columnist ridiculing our notable oddities, my soul cracks a little bit. *That's not Florida*, I want to scream. *That's not who we are at all!* Those writers don't know Florida, don't hold in their hearts the Florida of our dreams, the one we seek but rarely find.

Rambling along the lazy watercolor stretches of US 98, with the windows down and the tangled smell of pine forest and salt air, that dream dances within my grasp. That promised slice of vintage Florida lives here, as if an artist stepped in and created the tropical Technicolor beach town that exists in the unwashed corals and teals of your imagination. From the pine-lined forests of backwoods Florida to the sun-soaked beaches as the road stretches toward the coast, US 98 reveals every magnificent subculture in the Sunshine State.

Even still, the coastal stretch of road between Wakulla and Pensacola Beach takes commitment, because although the cities lie just 212 miles apart and Google Maps will lead you to believe you can make this drive in less than five hours, before you take the drive, you, like Google Maps, may fail to understand the lure of a fresh Florida oyster or the seductive pull of a cold beer to wash down a Styrofoam bowl of Indian Pass Raw Bar gumbo.

We start on the Georgia/Florida state line just north of Tallahassee, on US 319, here called Thomasville Road. North Florida, especially the panhandle, remains vastly untouched from the *Guide*'s portrayal of it, that of a land unlike south Florida, with "rich red clay" soil, gently sloping hills and a marked antebellum feel wholly absent from the state's coastline and southern interior. Floridians often quip, "You have to go north to get South" in Florida, because so much of the state's southern population consists not of generations of southerners but transplants, and much of Florida feels more like a theme park or resort than the South. This is not the case in inland north Florida: Tallahassee feels more like the Deep South than Key West.

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In 1939, *Guide* writers noted the Robert E. Lee monument outside of Tallahassee in Bradfordville. The Daughters of the Confederacy built the monument and dedicated it in the 1920s. The inscription reads, "Erected and dedicated by the United Daughters of the Confederacy and friends in loving memory of Robert E. Lee and to mark the route of the Dixie Highway."

Ask a longtime Floridian about the Civil War and you'll receive a grab bag of answers. Some will call it the "War of Northern Aggression" and talk at length about the economy and states' rights. Others will talk about racism and our ongoing debt to society, and still others will blanch physically at your question and perhaps even go so far as to pretend nothing like that ever happened in the Sunshine State.

In *The Burden of Southern History*, C. Vann Woodward argues that the South should not deny its past just because it's shameful. I agree; we need to talk about race. It still lives with us, and not talking about it doesn't help. The monument to Lee still stands. The state moved it

up roadside when widening the road, but not as an act of racial sensitivity: it was likely more convenient. I'm not in favor of removing the monument, but perhaps the inscription could reflect more nuanced perspectives, especially as it welcomes northerners to our fine state as they approach the capital.

Tallahassee became the state capital because it sat between Pensacola on the west and St. Augustine on the east back when most Floridians lived less than 50 miles from the Florida/Georgia border. As the route bisects the city, wooded roads and sloping hills turn into massive shade tree–lined streets. Its colonial architecture contrasts with the retail sectors, and beyond the city limits, historic buildings and parks abound, including Natural Bridge Battlefield just outside the city in Woodville.

In 1865, Confederate troops stopped Union soldiers here, helping Tallahassee earn the distinction of being the only capital east of the Mississippi that the Union could not overtake. That's not the state park's only significance, however. At first glance, Natural Bridge appears simply a delightful verdant park, perfect for picnics and strolling. Knobby-kneed cypress trees shade two ponds less than 100 yards apart and cluttered with duckweed. Feathery Spanish moss dangles overhead, shadowing the black water with tiny, arching wisps.

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The ponds, however, aren't two disparate ponds at all, but one river: the St. Marks. It flows from the north, vanishes into an underground sink, and reappears slightly south, where it continues until it spreads itself into Apalachee Bay, named for the Apalachee Indians, a tribe with a reputation among other indigenous nations as a fierce and wealthy people. Archaeologists place the Apalachee in Florida around 1000 BCE; they lived between the Aucilla and Ochlockonee Rivers from what is now the Georgia line south to the Gulf of Mexico. Some fifty thousand to sixty thousand Apalachees lived in the area until the Spanish explorer Pánfilo de Narváez showed up in Tallahassee, courtesy of some crafty Indians from the Tampa Bay area who suggested he could find gold in the areas of north Florida more easily than in the peninsula. That was 1528. Within 150 years the Apalachee culture disappeared through one of two means: Catholic conversion and/or murder by British soldiers allied with Creek Indians. Today, fewer than

three hundred Apalachee Indians exist. They no longer live in Florida, having moved first to Mobile, then on to Rapides Parish in Louisiana in the mid-eighteenth century.

As US 319 meanders farther away from Tallahassee, the urban traffic, franchises, and planned communities diminish. The western edge of the road borders Apalachicola National Forest, noted for longleaf pines and colorful assortments of wildflowers as well as a plethora of water—almost three thousand acres of freshwater in all. The deep blue of the watery sinks, lofty green and ocher fringes of longleaf pines, and tufts of money-colored wiregrass carpeting the forest floor offer what I can only imagine the whole of the inland Florida panhandle looked like three thousand years ago. Inside the forests of north Florida it's easy to forget the cluttered roads of main cities, the beaches dotted with visiting sunseekers, and the airports importing the next round of travelers hoping to see a scrap of paradise from their climate-controlled, sanitized, Gulf-view motel room.

At every turn the forest offers new vistas. Everything inside the forest feels and smells like it has just rained: a sprouting malachite newness. Saplings and saw palmetto break through the moist ground and stretch for the sky; in swampy parts, chunky cottonmouths bump through the bog while wading birds extend black dainty legs gracefully through muddy waters.

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US 319 edges along the eastern edge of the Apalachicola, but just east of the road along the stretch travelers will find Wakulla State Forest and Edward Ball State Park.

The Wakulla Forest once belonged to the St. Joe Company. Edward Ball, the company's founder and member of the Du Pont family, bought broad expanses of the panhandle in the 1920s.

Locals can enumerate the many sins of St. Joe, starting with its having bought land from locals for pennies on the dollar. It opened a paper mill that, while helping employ workers as the Depression gave way to war, emitted significant air contamination from sulfur. The mill used 35 million gallons of water every day, lowering the water table substantially, which led to sinkholes, changes in the land's topography, and significant water contamination as rainfall reached the aquifer too quickly. As St. Joe clear-cut old-growth longleaf pine forests, it

replanted the land with the faster-growing and—this is important—biologically different slash pine, reducing the longleaf pine to 2 percent of its population and earning the area a national designation: Critically Endangered Ecosystem.

As "punishment" for the company's environmental sins, the State of Florida paid the St. Joe Company $182 million for ninety thousand acres of prime land, turned it into a state park, and named it in honor of the man from whom they rescued it. When the St. Joe Company turned from growing trees to growing subdivisions, the state rerouted part of US 98 to better suit the needs of the company.

That's what's nice about Florida: there's something for everyone to exploit. We're equal opportunity that way. Today, locals take aim at a larger enemy than the massive St. Joe Company: Nestlé. Bottled water is a $4 billion industry in America, and drinking water is a big deal in Florida for many reasons. The bulk of the state depends, at least in part, on the Floridan Aquifer for drinking water. The Floridan Aquifer is an underground river encased in spongy limestone. For years, Floridians have heard that the water table is low and that we need to conserve water, and the state's five water management districts—initially created to deal with flood-control issues as people, farms, and ranches moved into the state with no regard for its intrinsic swampy qualities and the unbending nature of flowing water—have long limited things like how often a resident can water his vegetable garden or how much water a city can withdraw from the aquifer to deliver to its residents.

Despite the much-hyped shortages, when Nestlé asked the Suwannee River Water Management District for a permit to pump water for bottling in 2010, the same people who had convinced sweet old ladies we'd all die of thirst if they showered daily seemed ready to approve the permit. Nestlé promised to pump no more than 1.6 million gallons of water per day from the Wacissa River, a river east of US 319. Local residents went ballistic, and with good reason. Not only do the springs and rivers sparkling underneath the pine-studded wilderness remain the brightest of the area's gems, but the inequity of a government agency imposing draconian restrictions on citizens and then allowing a multinational corporation to swoop in and take what it wanted was all too obvious. The Florida Department of Environmental Protection

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