HIGH SCHOOL SOCIAL STUDIES · GRADES 9–12 · STUDENT HANDOUT

Florida: A Complete History

Pre-European Contact to the Present Day · 17 Chapters

17 Chapters	60+ Key Events	Key Figures Per Chapter	NGSSS Aligned

INTRODUCTION

A Peninsula of Many Stories

Florida's history spans more than 14,000 years. From the Ice Age hunters who first crossed onto the peninsula to the communities shaping Florida today, this handout traces the full arc of one of America's most complex and fascinating states. Each chapter focuses on a distinct era, introducing the key people, events, and forces that made Florida what it is. As you read, look for the threads that connect each chapter: the struggle for land, the fight for freedom, the tension between growth and environment, and the ongoing question of who belongs and who decides.

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CHAPTER

1 Pre-European Contact

Ancient Florida – c. 12,000 BCE to 1492 CE

Florida's human story begins at the end of the last Ice Age, when sea levels were nearly 300 feet lower and the Florida peninsula was more than twice its current size. The first Floridians — called Paleo-Indians — were nomadic hunters who tracked mastodons, giant ground sloths, and other megafauna across a vast grassland peninsula. Over thousands of years, as the climate warmed and the sea rose, cultures adapted, developed agriculture, built complex societies, and established trade networks spanning hundreds of miles.

KEY PEOPLES & CULTURES

Paleo-Indians

c. 12,000–7,500 BCE

Florida's first inhabitants arrived during the Ice Age. The Windover Archaeological Site in Brevard County preserves 8,000-year-old human remains with intact brain tissue — one of the most remarkable finds in North American archaeology.

Archaic Peoples

c. 7,500–1,000 BCE

As the climate warmed, Floridians adapted to a wetter environment. Shell midden mounds began appearing along coasts and rivers. Trade networks expanded. The Mount Taylor culture and Orange culture developed along the St. Johns River.

Calusa

c. 500 BCE–1750 CE

One of the most powerful chiefdoms in North America. The Calusa built shell mound cities across Southwest Florida, controlled a vast trade network, and resisted Spanish colonization for 200 years. Their capital, Mound Key, rose from the waters of Estero Bay.

Timucua

c. 200 BCE–1700 CE

The most widely documented of Florida's indigenous peoples, spread across 35+ chiefdoms in North and Central Florida. Skilled farmers and traders, they were the first Floridians to be illustrated by European artists — in striking detail by Jacques Le Moyne in 1564.

Apalachee

c. 1000–1704 CE

The dominant political power of the Florida panhandle. Skilled maize farmers who built large towns and played a ball game of great ceremonial importance. They resisted Hernando de Soto before eventually becoming the heart of the Spanish mission system.

Tequesta, Tocobaga & Ais

Various

The Tequesta inhabited the Miami River area; the Tocobaga built mounds around Tampa Bay; the Ais collected goods from Spanish shipwrecks along the east coast. Each nation had distinct cultures, governance systems, and relationships with the land and sea.

DID YOU KNOW

By 1492, an estimated 350,000 people speaking dozens of languages lived in what is now Florida — more people than lived in England's largest city at the time.

CHAPTER 2

Colonial Florida

1492–1821

Three centuries of colonial rule — first Spanish, briefly British, then Spanish again — transformed Florida's landscape, peoples, and identity. Spanish expeditions brought disease, violence, and missionary zeal. The Franciscan mission system incorporated tens of thousands of indigenous Floridians into colonial labor. Britain's two-decade rule introduced plantation agriculture. And as European powers competed, a new people emerged in Florida's interior: the Seminoles.

TIMELINE OF COLONIAL FLORIDA

1513	**Ponce de León Claims Florida**	First documented European landing. Names the land "La Florida" during the Feast of Flowers.
1528	**Narváez Expedition Fails**	600-man expedition destroyed by disease, starvation, and Apalachee resistance. Only 4 survive.
1539–42	**De Soto's Brutal March**	Most extensive Spanish expedition through Florida and the Southeast. Leaves a trail of violence and disease.
1565	**St. Augustine Founded**	Pedro Menéndez de Avilés establishes North America's oldest continuously occupied European city.
1573	**Mission System Begins**	Franciscan missionaries begin converting and incorporating Timucua and Apalachee into colonial labor.
1693	**Fort Mose Established**	Spain grants freedom to enslaved people escaping British colonies. Fort Mose becomes North America's first free Black settlement.
1702–04	**Mission System Destroyed**	English forces and Creek warriors burn Florida's missions; thousands of Apalachee killed or enslaved.
1763	**Britain Takes Florida**	Spain cedes Florida to Britain after the Seven Years' War. Britain divides it into East and West Florida.
1783	**Spain Regains Florida**	Britain returns Florida to Spain after the American Revolution.
1817–18	**First Seminole War**	Andrew Jackson invades Florida pursuing Seminoles and escaped enslaved people.
1821	**U.S. Acquires Florida**	The Adams-Onís Treaty transfers Florida to the United States.

KEY FIGURES

1460–1521

Juan Ponce de León

Conquistador

Led the 1513 expedition naming Florida. Returned in 1521 and was mortally wounded by Calusa warriors defending their homeland.

c.1500–1542

Hernando de Soto

Conquistador

Led the most brutal European expedition through Florida (1539–42). His march spread devastating disease and violence across the Southeast.

c.1490–1560

Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca

Survivor & Author

One of four survivors of the Narváez disaster. Lived among indigenous peoples 8 years. His memoir La Relación is a landmark document of early American history.

1519–1574

Pedro Menéndez de Avilés

Founder of St. Augustine

Founded St. Augustine in 1565 and expelled French Protestant settlers. Built the first lasting Spanish colonial infrastructure in Florida.

CHAPTER

3 Territorial Florida Through Secession

1821–1861

Under U.S. control, Florida was immediately defined by two brutal realities: the forced removal of the Seminole people and the expansion of chattel slavery. American settlers demanded Seminole land and used enslaved African labor to build a plantation economy in the panhandle. The result was the Second and Third Seminole Wars — the longest and costliest Indian wars in U.S. history — followed by Florida's admission as a slave state in 1845 and its secession from the Union in 1861.

TIMELINE

1822	**Florida Territory Organized**	Tallahassee chosen as capital, centrally located between Pensacola and St. Augustine.
1823	**Treaty of Moultrie Creek**	Seminoles forced onto a Central Florida reservation, surrendering most of their lands.
1830	**Indian Removal Act**	Federal law orders removal of all southeastern Native Americans to west of the Mississippi River.
1835–42	**Second Seminole War**	The longest and costliest Indian war in U.S. history. Osceola leads Seminole resistance. 1,500+ U.S. soldiers die.
1845	**Florida Achieves Statehood**	Florida becomes the 27th state on March 3, 1845 — admitted as a slave state alongside Iowa.
1855–58	**Third Seminole War**	Final conflict. Most remaining Seminoles removed to Oklahoma; a small band retreats into the Everglades and never surrenders.
1860	**Lincoln Elected**	Abraham Lincoln's election triggers the secession crisis across the South.
1861	**Florida Secedes**	Florida votes to leave the Union on January 10, 1861 — the third state to secede.

Osceola

Seminole Leader, c.1804–1838

The most famous leader of Seminole resistance. Refused to sign removal treaties, famously stabbing his knife through the document. Captured under a white flag of truce in 1837 and died in captivity, becoming a national symbol of indigenous resistance.

Slavery in Territorial Florida

Economics & Human Suffering

By 1860, enslaved African Americans made up nearly half of Florida's population. Cotton and tobacco plantations dominated the panhandle. Florida's legal system was built to protect slavery, and enslaved people who sought freedom among the Seminoles were a key cause of the Seminole Wars.

The Surviving Seminoles

Everglades Refuge

After three wars, a few hundred Seminoles retreated deep into the Everglades. They never signed a peace treaty — making the Seminole Tribe of Florida one of the only nations that never formally surrendered to the United States. Their descendants lead two federally recognized tribes in Florida today.

Tallahassee & the Planter Elite

Capital & Power

The territorial capital grew as the center of Florida's plantation economy. A small class of wealthy planters dominated territorial politics and pushed relentlessly for Seminole removal and the protection of slavery — setting the stage for secession.

CHAPTER

4 Civil War in Florida

1861–1865

Florida was the least populated Confederate state, but it was critical to the Southern war effort as a supplier of beef, salt, pork, and cotton. Union forces occupied key coastal positions throughout the war, turning Florida into a contested battleground. Thousands of enslaved Floridians escaped to Union lines — many joining the United States Colored Troops and fighting to end the very system that had enslaved them. The war ended slavery in Florida, but left the state in poverty and racial conflict that would define the next century.

TIMELINE

1861	**Florida Joins the Confederacy**	Florida secedes January 10. Supplies beef, salt, and other resources vital to Confederate armies throughout the war.
1862	**Union Forces Occupy Key Points**	U.S. Navy and Army seize Pensacola, Key West, Jacksonville, and Fernandina. Florida's coastline remains contested throughout the war.
1863	**Emancipation Proclamation**	Lincoln's proclamation frees enslaved people in Confederate states. Hundreds of enslaved Floridians escape to Union lines and join the fight.
1864	**Battle of Olustee**	Florida's largest Civil War battle. Confederate victory halts the Union attempt to retake the state. U.S. Colored Troops fight with distinction and suffer heavy casualties.
1865	**Slavery Ends in Florida**	The 13th Amendment abolishes slavery. Florida's 62,000+ enslaved people are freed. The state is left in economic ruin.

United States Colored Troops

Military Service & Sacrifice

Thousands of Black Floridians and formerly enslaved people served in the USCT, fighting in major engagements including the Battle of Olustee (February 20, 1864). Their courage and sacrifice were central to the argument for Black citizenship and voting rights after the war.

Battle of Olustee

February 20, 1864

Florida's largest Civil War battle was fought near Lake City. Confederate forces under General Joseph Finegan defeated a Union force attempting to cut Confederate supply lines and recruit Black soldiers. It remains the only major Civil War battle fought entirely on Florida soil.

Florida's Confederate Role

The Breadbasket of the Confederacy

Despite its small white population, Florida supplied enormous quantities of beef, salt (for preserving food), pork, fish, and cotton to Confederate armies. The "Cow Cavalry" raided deep into Central Florida to drive cattle north. Without Florida's supplies, the Confederate war effort would have collapsed much sooner.

Enslaved Floridians & Freedom

Resistance & Liberation

Enslaved Floridians did not wait passively for freedom. Thousands escaped to Union lines, providing military intelligence, labor, and soldiers. Others engaged in quiet resistance — work slowdowns, sabotage, and escape. Their actions helped destroy the Confederate war effort from within.

CHAPTER 5

Reconstruction

1865–1877

Reconstruction offered African Floridians a brief, extraordinary window of political power. Black men voted, held office, built schools, and shaped the state's new constitution. Jonathan Gibbs served as Secretary of State and Superintendent of Public Instruction — among the highest offices held by a Black American anywhere in the South. But this era of promise was crushed by white supremacist violence, the Ku Klux Klan, and the 1877 withdrawal of federal troops that ended Reconstruction across the South.

1865	**Freedmen's Bureau Established**	Federal agency assists formerly enslaved people with education, employment, and legal rights across Florida.
1866	**Black Codes Enacted**	Florida passes "Black Codes" restricting the rights and movement of freed people — effectively reimposing slavery in all but name.
1868	**Florida Readmitted to Union**	Florida ratifies the 14th Amendment and is readmitted. Black men gain the right to vote and begin winning elected offices.
1868–77	**Reconstruction Era**	African Americans serve in the Florida legislature, as sheriffs, tax collectors, and school officials. Schools and churches are built across the state.
1871	**KKK Violence Escalates**	White supremacist terrorism intensifies across Florida, targeting Black voters, officeholders, and Republican organizers.
1877	**Reconstruction Ends**	Federal troops withdraw following the Compromise of 1877. White supremacist governments take power across the South, including Florida.
1887	**Eatonville Incorporated**	The nation's first incorporated Black municipality is founded near Orlando — birthplace of author Zora Neale Hurston.

KEY FIGURE

Jonathan Gibbs (1828–1874) — Born free in Philadelphia, educated at Dartmouth and Princeton Theological Seminary, Gibbs served as Florida's Secretary of State (1868–72) and Superintendent of Public Instruction (1872–74). He built Florida's public school system and was one of the most accomplished Black officials in Reconstruction-era America. He died suddenly in 1874, possibly poisoned by political enemies.

CHAPTER

6 The Gilded Age

1877–1898

The arrival of the railroad transformed Florida from a remote, war-scarred frontier into a national tourist destination and agricultural powerhouse. Henry Flagler built luxury hotels and his Florida East Coast Railway down the Atlantic coast; Henry Plant did the same on the Gulf side. Cigar workers in Ybor City built one of the most vibrant immigrant communities in the South. And across the state, African Americans faced a violent new system of racial oppression: Jim Crow.

1881	**Hamilton Disston Purchase**	Disston buys 4 million acres of Florida land, spurring Everglades drainage and agricultural development.
1883	**Plant's Railroad Reaches Tampa**	Henry Plant's railroad network transforms Tampa from a small village into a regional hub.
1885	**Flagler's East Coast Railway**	Henry Flagler begins building the railroad and luxury hotels that will open Florida's Atlantic coast to tourism.
1886	**Ybor City Founded**	Vicente Martinez-Ybor establishes a cigar-manufacturing city near Tampa. Cuban, Spanish, and Italian immigrants create a unique multicultural community.
1887	**Jim Crow Begins**	Florida enacts laws segregating railroads, schools, and public spaces. Black Floridians are systematically disenfranchised through poll taxes and literacy tests.
1894–95	**Great Freeze**	Two devastating freezes destroy Florida's citrus industry, pushing agriculture south and accelerating Flagler's push toward Miami.
1896	**Miami Incorporated**	Henry Flagler extends his railroad to Miami, which incorporates as a city. Miami's first registered voters are mostly Black women.

1830–1913

Henry Flagler

Railroad & Hotel Magnate

Co-founder of Standard Oil who invested his fortune in Florida's East Coast. Built the Florida East Coast Railway from Jacksonville to Key West and a chain of luxury hotels that created modern Miami, Palm Beach, and Florida's tourism industry.

1819–1899

Henry Plant

Gulf Coast Railroad Builder

Flagler's rival on the West Coast. Built railroads to Tampa and the opulent Tampa Bay Hotel (now the University of Tampa). His railroad made Tampa the staging ground for the Spanish-American War.

1818–1896

Vicente Martinez-Ybor

Cigar Industry Pioneer

Founded Ybor City near Tampa in 1886. His cigar factories attracted thousands of Cuban, Spanish, and Italian immigrants, creating a multiethnic working-class community unlike anywhere else in the South.

1875–1955

Mary McLeod Bethune

Educator & Civil Rights Leader

Founded the Daytona Educational and Industrial Training School for Negro Girls in 1904 (later Bethune-Cookman University). Became an advisor to President Roosevelt and one of the most powerful Black women in American history.

CHAPTER

7 The Spanish-American War

1895–1902

Florida played a pivotal role in the Spanish-American War of 1898 — the brief conflict that ended Spain's colonial empire and launched the United States onto the world stage as an imperial power. Tampa served as the primary staging ground for the U.S. invasion of Cuba, transforming the small Gulf Coast city almost overnight. Key West and Jacksonville were also important mobilization points. The war had deep roots in Florida's Cuban immigrant community, which had long supported Cuban independence through the writings of José Martí and the fundraising efforts of Ybor City's cigar workers.

1895	**Cuban War of Independence Begins**	Cuban revolutionaries launch a new war against Spanish colonial rule. Florida's Cuban community provides crucial financial and political support.
1895–98	**José Martí in Florida**	Cuban poet and revolutionary José Martí delivers speeches in Tampa and Key West, raising money and support for Cuban independence.
Feb. 1898	**USS Maine Explodes**	The U.S. battleship Maine explodes in Havana Harbor. American newspapers blame Spain, whipping up war fever.
Apr. 1898	**U.S. Declares War on Spain**	Congress declares war. Tampa becomes the primary staging ground for the U.S. Army's invasion of Cuba.
June 1898	**Rough Riders Depart Tampa**	Theodore Roosevelt's Rough Riders and the Buffalo Soldiers of the 9th and 10th Cavalry depart from Tampa Bay for Cuba.
July 1898	**Battle of San Juan Hill**	U.S. forces, including the Buffalo Soldiers and Rough Riders, capture San Juan Hill. Spain's defeat becomes inevitable.
Aug. 1898	**Spain Surrenders**	The war ends in 10 weeks. Spain cedes Cuba, Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippines to the United States.
1902	**Cuban Independence**	Cuba formally becomes independent, though the U.S. retains significant influence through the Platt Amendment.

Tampa's Transformation

Military Hub

In 1898, Tampa was a small city of about 15,000 people. Suddenly 30,000 U.S. soldiers poured in, overwhelming housing, sanitation, and food supplies. The chaos was immense — but Tampa emerged from the war as a major American city, its railroad connections and port facilities proven on a national stage.

The Buffalo Soldiers in Florida

African American Service

The 9th and 10th Cavalry — African American regiments known as the Buffalo Soldiers — trained and departed from Tampa for Cuba. In Tampa, they faced fierce racial hostility from white soldiers and civilians. Their distinguished combat record at San Juan Hill was largely ignored by a segregated press.

José Martí & Florida's Cuban Community

Roots of Revolution

Cuban poet and independence leader José Martí visited Tampa and Key West repeatedly in the 1890s, delivering stirring speeches in Ybor City's cigar factories. Cigar workers — many of whom were read to aloud while they worked — donated a portion of their wages to fund the Cuban revolution.

Florida After the War

Tourism & Growth

The war put Florida on the national map. Soldiers who had passed through Tampa and other Florida cities returned as tourists and settlers. The resulting population and investment boom accelerated Flagler's railroad push south and helped set the stage for the land speculation of the 1920s.

CHAPTER

8 Progressive Florida

1900–1917

The Progressive Era brought significant reforms to Florida — and significant contradictions. White reformers pushed for railroad regulation, prohibition, child labor laws, and improved public education, even as they simultaneously stripped Black Floridians of the vote, enforced brutal convict leasing, and tolerated horrific racial violence. The era also saw explosive growth in Florida's agricultural sector, the beginnings of the phosphate and turpentine industries, and the first stirrings of the environmental movement as boosters and conservationists clashed over the future of the Everglades.

1900	**Florida's Population Booms**	Florida's population reaches 528,000 — more than double the 1880 figure. Growth concentrated in Jacksonville, Tampa, and Pensacola.
1905	**Flagler Extends Railway South**	Flagler continues extending the Florida East Coast Railway, reaching Homestead. Work on the "Oversea Railroad" to Key West begins.
1905	**Drainage of the Everglades Begins**	Governor Napoleon Broward campaigns on draining the Everglades for farming. A massive state-funded drainage project begins, permanently altering South Florida's ecology.
1908	**Child Labor Reform**	Florida passes early child labor restrictions as Progressive reformers target the use of children in turpentine camps and cigar factories.
1910	**Convict Leasing System**	Florida's convict leasing system — which rents out prisoners, mostly Black men, to private companies — is at its peak. The system is essentially re-enslavement.
1912	**Flagler's Overseas Railroad Opens**	The engineering marvel of its age: a railroad stretching 128 miles over open water to Key West. Called the "Eighth Wonder of the World."
1915	**Women's Suffrage Movement Grows**	Florida women organize for the right to vote. Florida will ultimately refuse to ratify the 19th Amendment in 1920.

KEY ISSUE

The Convict Leasing System — Florida leased prisoners, overwhelmingly Black men convicted on trumped-up charges, to private turpentine camps, phosphate mines, and farms. Conditions were often worse than slavery. Florida was one of the last states to abolish the system, ending it in 1923 after the murder of Martin Tabert, a white North Dakota man, sparked national outrage.

CHAPTER 9

Florida in World War I

1917–1920

Though distant from the European battlefields, Florida made substantial contributions to World War I and was profoundly changed by it. The state's warm climate made it ideal for military training, attracting dozens of new bases and thousands of soldiers. Florida's ports and coastline became strategically important as German submarines threatened Atlantic shipping. The war also accelerated the Great Migration of African Americans northward and sparked a wave of racial violence as Black veterans returning home demanded the rights they had fought for.

1917	**U.S. Enters World War I**	Congress declares war on Germany in April. Florida men register for the draft; over 42,000 Floridians will serve.
1917	**Military Bases Established**	Camp Johnston (Jacksonville), Camp Wheeler, and other training facilities are established across Florida, bringing an economic boom.
1917–18	**German U-Boat Threat**	German submarines sink merchant ships within sight of Florida's beaches. Pensacola's naval air station becomes critical to anti-submarine patrol.
1917	**Spruce Production**	Florida's timber industry shifts to producing spruce and other materials critical to aircraft manufacturing.
1918	**Influenza Pandemic Hits Florida**	The 1918 flu pandemic kills tens of thousands of Floridians. Military camps are especially hard-hit.
1919	**Veterans Return Home**	Black veterans return expecting recognition of their service. Instead they face intensified racial violence — part of the nationwide "Red Summer" of 1919.
1920	**Ocoee Massacre**	On Election Day 1920, white mobs kill dozens of Black residents of Ocoee and burn their homes after a Black man attempts to vote. One of the worst Election Day massacres in U.S. history.

THE OCOEE MASSACRE

On November 2, 1920 — Election Day — a white mob in Ocoee, Florida attacked the Black community after Julius "July" Perry attempted to vote. At least 30–60 Black residents were killed (the true number is unknown), 500 were driven from their homes, and the entire Black community of Ocoee was destroyed. The town would not have a significant Black population again for decades.

CHAPTER

10 The 1920s: Boom, Bust & Hurricane

1920–1929

The 1920s in Florida were a decade of dizzying extremes. The first half brought the greatest real estate boom in American history to that point — land in Miami and along both coasts sold and re-sold at fantastic prices as speculators from across the country poured in. Then, years before the national economy collapsed, Florida's boom turned to catastrophic bust. Two devastating hurricanes, a collapsing real estate market, a Mediterranean fruit fly infestation, and the failure of the state's banks left Florida in depression by the mid-1920s, years before the rest of the country.

1920	**Florida Land Boom Begins**	Nationwide speculation drives Florida real estate to extraordinary prices. Miami's population explodes. Developers drain swamps and sell lots by mail.
1923	**Rosewood Massacre**	A white mob destroys the prosperous Black town of Rosewood, killing at least 6 residents and forcing the entire community to flee. The town is burned to the ground.
1924	**Miami Beach Flourishes**	Carl Fisher's Miami Beach becomes one of the most fashionable resorts in America, symbolizing the Jazz Age excess of the land boom.
1925	**Boom Peaks**	Land prices reach their height. Lots in Miami sell for thousands of dollars per front foot. A railroad embargo on non-essential goods to Florida signals the coming collapse.
1926	**Great Miami Hurricane**	A powerful hurricane strikes Miami on September 18, killing 400+ and destroying much of what the boom had built. The bubble bursts.
1928	**Okeechobee Hurricane**	The deadliest natural disaster in Florida history kills 2,500+ people, mostly Black migrant farm workers around Lake Okeechobee. The lake's inadequate dike fails catastrophically.
1929	**Great Depression Begins**	Florida's economy, already shattered, is hit again by the national stock market crash. Banks fail across the state.

The Rosewood Massacre

January 1923

The prosperous Black community of Rosewood was destroyed by a white mob over the course of a week in January 1923. The violence began when a white woman falsely claimed a Black man had assaulted her. At least 6 Black residents were killed; the town was burned to the ground. Survivors fled into the swamps. The state of Florida did not acknowledge responsibility until 1994, when it paid reparations to survivors and descendants.

The Land Boom & Its Victims

Speculation & Fraud

The Florida land boom of the early 1920s attracted legitimate investors and outright fraudsters alike. Developers sold underwater lots as "waterfront property." Speculators bought and resold land they had never seen. When the bubble burst, thousands of middle-class Americans lost their life savings — a preview of the national collapse that would follow in 1929.

CHAPTER

11 The 1930s: Depression & New Deal Florida

1929–1939

Florida entered the 1930s already devastated. The land bust and hurricanes of the 1920s had wiped out banks, businesses, and savings years before the national Great Depression began. When the Depression hit the rest of the country in 1929–30, Florida was doubly crushed. Unemployment soared, thousands of families lost their homes, and hunger was widespread. Yet the New Deal brought significant federal investment to Florida — building roads, bridges, parks, and public buildings that still define the state's infrastructure today. The Overseas Highway replaced Flagler's hurricane-destroyed railroad; the Civilian Conservation Corps built state parks; and the WPA employed artists, writers, and musicians across the state.

1929–32	**Bank Failures Sweep Florida**	Dozens of Florida banks fail in the early Depression years. Depositors lose everything. Unemployment reaches 25%+ in major cities.
1933	**New Deal Arrives in Florida**	FDR's New Deal programs — CCC, WPA, PWA, and others — begin pumping federal money into Florida's devastated economy.
1933	**Labor Day Hurricane**	A powerful hurricane strikes the Florida Keys in September 1935, killing 400+, including hundreds of World War I veterans in CCC camps. Destroys the remaining Overseas Railroad tracks.
1935	**Labor Day Hurricane & Veterans**	The hurricane kills hundreds of Bonus Army veterans working on New Deal highway projects in the Keys. Ernest Hemingway's furious essay blames the federal government for leaving them in danger.
1938	**Overseas Highway Opens**	Built on the roadbed of Flagler's destroyed railroad, the Overseas Highway connects Miami to Key West for the first time by car.
1938	**Florida's Tourism Survives**	Despite the Depression, Florida's tourism industry persists. The state promotes itself aggressively to northern visitors seeking cheap sunshine.
1939	**World War II Begins in Europe**	Germany invades Poland. Though the U.S. is not yet at war, Florida's military installations begin expanding in anticipation.

NEW DEAL IN FLORIDA

The CCC built or improved dozens of Florida state parks, including Myakka River, Highlands Hammock, and Gold Head Branch. The WPA employed writers who produced the remarkable Florida: A Guide to the Southernmost State (1939), still a valuable historical document. The PWA built schools, courthouses, and bridges across the state — much of which still stands.

CHAPTER 12

World War II

1939–1945

World War II transformed Florida more profoundly than any event since the Civil War. The state's warm climate, long coastline, and flat terrain made it ideal for military training, and hundreds of bases, airfields, and naval stations were established from Pensacola to Miami. More than 250,000 Floridians served in the armed forces. German U-boats patrolled just off Florida's beaches, sinking dozens of ships visible from shore. German and Italian prisoners of war were held in camps across the state. And the war’s industrial demands — and the soldiers who trained here and returned as civilians — set the stage for Florida’s postwar population explosion.

1941	**Pearl Harbor; Florida Mobilizes**	Japan attacks Pearl Harbor on December 7. Florida immediately becomes a frontline state — its 1,200 miles of coastline vulnerable to U-boat attack.
1942	**U-Boat Campaign Off Florida**	German submarines sink dozens of ships within sight of Florida's beaches in early 1942. Oil, bodies, and wreckage wash ashore. Beaches are briefly closed at night.
1942	**Military Bases Established**	Hundreds of military installations are built or expanded across Florida. By 1945, over 170,000 military personnel are stationed in the state.
1942	**Florida's Economy Transformed**	Military spending ends Florida's Depression. Factories, shipyards, and support industries boom. Women enter the workforce in large numbers.
1944	**German POW Camps**	Florida holds thousands of German and Italian prisoners of war, who work on farms and in phosphate mines. Many develop affection for Florida and return after the war as immigrants.
1945	**War Ends; Veterans Return**	WWII ends in August 1945. Hundreds of thousands of veterans who trained in Florida return as permanent residents, launching the postwar boom.

The U-Boat War Off Florida

1942

In the first months of 1942, German submarines sank more than 24 ships off Florida's coast in what the U.S. Navy called the "Second Happy Time." Floridians could see burning tankers from the beach. The carnage ended only when the U.S. Navy developed effective convoy and anti-submarine tactics.

Black Floridians in World War II

Service & Segregation

African Americans from Florida served in segregated units, trained in segregated facilities, and faced discrimination even as they fought for their country. Many returned from the war radicalized by the contradiction of fighting fascism abroad while living under Jim Crow at home — helping fuel the early Civil Rights Movement.

CHAPTER

13 1946–1959: Postwar Growth & Early Civil Rights

1946–1959

The postwar years brought explosive growth to Florida. Veterans who had trained here returned with their families; air conditioning made the subtropical climate bearable year-round; the interstate highway brought millions of new residents south. Florida's population doubled between 1945 and 1960. At the same time, African Americans began the sustained, organized struggle to dismantle Jim Crow. The NAACP grew dramatically in Florida; NAACP leader Harry T. Moore was assassinated on Christmas night 1951; and the Tallahassee Bus Boycott of 1956 showed that the Civil Rights Movement would reach every corner of Florida.

1947	**Everglades National Park**	President Truman dedicates Everglades National Park, protecting 1.5 million acres of unique subtropical wilderness.
1949	**University of Florida Challenged**	Virgil Hawkins applies to the University of Florida Law School and is rejected because of his race. His decade-long legal fight becomes a landmark civil rights case.
1951	**Harry T. Moore Assassinated**	NAACP leader Harry T. Moore and his wife are killed when a bomb destroys their home in Mims on Christmas night. He is considered the first martyr of the modern Civil Rights Movement.
1954	**Brown v. Board of Education**	Supreme Court orders school desegregation. Florida's response is largely defiant; the state passes a "Pupil Assignment Law" to slow integration.
1956	**Tallahassee Bus Boycott**	Florida A&M; University students Rosa Parks-style refusal sparks a months-long boycott of Tallahassee's segregated buses, parallel to the Montgomery Boycott.
1957	**Cape Canaveral Begins**	The U.S. begins launching rockets from Cape Canaveral. The Space Race is underway.
1958	**NASA Established**	NASA is created. Cape Canaveral becomes America's primary launch site, bringing thousands of engineers and scientists to Florida's Space Coast.

1905–1951

Harry T. Moore

NAACP Leader & Martyr

A pioneering NAACP organizer who registered tens of thousands of Black voters and investigated lynchings across Florida. Assassinated by a Klan bomb on Christmas night 1951. Called the first martyr of the modern Civil Rights Movement.

1914–1980

C.K. Steele

Tallahassee Boycott Leader

NAACP president and minister who led the Tallahassee Bus Boycott of 1956. Co-founded the Southern Christian Leadership Conference with Dr. King and remained a leading civil rights voice in Florida for decades.

CHAPTER

14 The 1960s: Civil Rights, Space & Change

1960–1969

The 1960s transformed Florida on multiple fronts simultaneously. The Civil Rights Movement intensified, with sit-ins, freedom rides, marches, and voter registration drives challenging Jim Crow across the state. The Space Race made Florida the launchpad for humanity's greatest technological achievement: landing on the Moon. The Cuban Missile Crisis brought the Cold War terrifyingly close to Florida's shores. And the Cuban Revolution of 1959 triggered a massive wave of exile immigration that would fundamentally and permanently reshape South Florida.

1960	**Sit-Ins Across Florida**	Students at Florida A&M;, the University of Florida, and other schools stage lunch counter sit-ins, challenging segregation across the state.
1961	**Freedom Riders in Florida**	Freedom Riders challenging bus segregation are attacked in Alabama and continue into Florida, testing federal desegregation orders.
1961	**Bay of Pigs Invasion**	CIA-trained Cuban exiles, many based in South Florida, launch the failed Bay of Pigs invasion. The disaster deepens the Cuban exile community's relationship with Florida.
1962	**Cuban Missile Crisis**	Soviet nuclear missiles discovered in Cuba. For 13 days in October, Florida — 90 miles from Cuba — is on the front line of potential nuclear war.
1963	**Kennedy Assassination**	President Kennedy, who had visited Cape Canaveral just weeks before, is assassinated in Dallas. The space center is renamed Kennedy Space Center in his honor.
1964	**Civil Rights Act**	Landmark federal legislation outlaws segregation. Florida Civil Rights activists had spent years demanding these protections.
1965	**Voting Rights Act**	Federal law protects Black voters' right to vote, dismantling Florida's system of disenfranchisement.
1969	**Moon Landing**	Apollo 11 launches from Kennedy Space Center on July 16. Neil Armstrong walks on the Moon on July 20, 1969.

THE CUBAN EXILE COMMUNITY

The Cuban Revolution of 1959 sent the first of many waves of Cuban exiles to Miami. By the mid-1960s, Miami's Little Havana was a thriving exile community. Cuban Americans would transform South Florida's culture, cuisine, politics, and economy — making Miami one of the most distinctly Latin cities in the United States and a gateway between North and South America.

CHAPTER

15 The 1970s & 1980s: Growth, Crisis & Transformation

1970–1989

The 1970s and 1980s cemented Florida as one of America's most dynamic — and troubled — states. Walt Disney World's 1971 opening transformed Central Florida from orange groves into a global tourism empire. The 1980 Mariel Boatlift brought 125,000 Cuban refugees in a matter of months. Cocaine trafficking made Miami one of the most violent cities in America. The environmental movement forced a reckoning with decades of Everglades destruction. And Florida's population continued growing at a staggering pace, straining infrastructure, schools, and resources.

1971	**Walt Disney World Opens**	Disney World opens near Orlando on October 1. Central Florida's transformation from agricultural backwater to global tourism hub accelerates dramatically.
1972	**Environmental Protection**	Florida passes the Comprehensive Planning Act and Land Conservation Act, beginning the state's effort to manage explosive growth and protect natural resources.
1973	**Endangered Species Act**	Florida's panther, manatee, and other species gain federal protection. Environmental advocacy grows across the state.
1980	**Mariel Boatlift**	125,000 Cuban refugees arrive in South Florida in a matter of months after Castro opens the port of Mariel. Miami's infrastructure is overwhelmed.
1980	**McDuffie Riots**	Miami erupts in riots after an all-white jury acquits police officers who beat Arthur McDuffie, a Black insurance agent, to death. 18 people killed, $100 million in damage.
1981–86	**Cocaine Wars**	Miami becomes the epicenter of the cocaine trade. Homicide rates soar. The Medellin Cartel operates openly. Miami Vice captures the era's dangerous glamour.
1984	**Haitian & Central American Immigration**	Waves of Haitian refugees and Central Americans fleeing civil wars reshape South Florida's demographics and culture.
1986	**Space Shuttle Challenger Disaster**	Space Shuttle Challenger explodes 73 seconds after launch from Kennedy Space Center on January 28, killing all 7 crew members including teacher Christa McAuliffe.
1989	**Hurricane Hugo; Everglades Crisis**	Everglades restoration becomes a state and federal priority as decades of drainage and agricultural runoff cause visible ecological collapse.

CHAPTER

16 The 1990s & Early 2000s

1990–2010

The 1990s brought new prosperity to Florida, but also catastrophic natural disasters and deepening political divisions. Hurricane Andrew in 1992 devastated South Dade County in the costliest natural disaster in U.S. history to that point. A second real estate boom drove explosive growth in previously rural areas. And in 2000, Florida's 25 electoral votes — decided by a margin of just 537 ballots and weeks of legal battles — determined the presidency of the United States. The decade ended with the September 11 attacks, several of whose hijackers had trained in Florida, and a housing bubble that would soon prove as devastating as the 1920s land boom.

1992	**Hurricane Andrew**	Category 5 hurricane devastates Homestead and South Dade County on August 24. 65 killed; 175,000 left homeless; $27 billion in damage (costliest U.S. disaster at the time).
1994	**Rosewood Reparations**	Florida pays reparations to survivors and descendants of the 1923 Rosewood Massacre — the first time a U.S. state paid reparations for racial violence.
1996	**Valujet Crash & Everglades**	Valujet Flight 592 crashes into the Everglades, killing all 110 aboard. Focuses national attention on Florida's aviation safety and the Everglades' fragility.
1998	**Everglades Restoration Plan**	Congress authorizes the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan — the largest environmental restoration project in U.S. history.
2000	**Presidential Election Crisis**	The Bush v. Gore election is decided by 537 Florida votes after a month of recounts, court battles, and the Supreme Court's intervention. Florida becomes a symbol of electoral dysfunction.
2001	**September 11 Attacks**	Several of the 9/11 hijackers had trained at Florida flight schools. The attacks and their aftermath transform Florida's military and tourism economy.
2004–05	**Back-to-Back Hurricane Seasons**	Florida is struck by eight named storms in two years — Charley, Frances, Ivan, Jeanne, Katrina, Wilma, and more — causing tens of billions in damage.
2007–10	**Housing Crisis & Recession**	Florida's real estate bubble — built on speculation and subprime mortgages — collapses in the worst housing crash since the 1920s.

THE 2000 ELECTION

Florida's 2000 presidential election — featuring hanging chads, butterfly ballots, and the Supreme Court's 5-4 decision in Bush v. Gore — stopped a recount that could have changed the result. The 537-vote margin out of nearly 6 million cast remains one of the most consequential and contested outcomes in American political history.

CHAPTER

17 2011–Present: Contemporary Florida

2011–Present

Contemporary Florida is a state of profound contradictions. One of the fastest-growing states in the nation, yet deeply vulnerable to sea level rise and intensifying hurricanes. A state that was once the ultimate political swing state but has shifted decisively Republican at the state level while its major cities remain Democratic. A global tourism and retirement destination grappling with housing unaffordability, immigration policy, and environmental collapse. The tragedies of Trayvon Martin, the Pulse nightclub, and Parkland have made Florida a flashpoint for the nation's most urgent debates about race, guns, and justice.

2012	**Trayvon Martin**	The shooting of unarmed Black teenager Trayvon Martin in Sanford and the acquittal of George Zimmerman helps spark the Black Lives Matter movement.
2013	**Florida's "Stand Your Ground" Law**	Florida's Stand Your Ground law, used in the Zimmerman defense, becomes the center of national debate about self-defense, race, and justice.
2016	**Pulse Nightclub Shooting**	49 people killed in a hate crime at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando on June 12 — the deadliest mass shooting in U.S. history at that time.
2017	**Hurricane Irma**	One of the most powerful Atlantic hurricanes ever strikes the Florida Keys and mainland, causing $50 billion in damage and displacing hundreds of thousands.
2018	**Parkland School Shooting**	17 students and staff killed at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland on February 14. Student survivors launch the March for Our Lives national movement demanding gun reform.
2018	**Amendment 4**	Florida voters pass Amendment 4, restoring voting rights to 1.4 million people with felony convictions — the largest single expansion of voting rights since the Voting Rights Act.
2021	**Surfside Condo Collapse**	The Champlain Towers South condominium collapses in Surfside, killing 98 people — raising urgent questions about aging infrastructure and sea-level-related saltwater intrusion.
2022	**Hurricane Ian**	Category 4 Hurricane Ian devastates Fort Myers and Southwest Florida on September 28 — one of the costliest and deadliest hurricanes in Florida and U.S. history.
2023–Present	**Culture War Florida**	Florida becomes a national laboratory for conservative governance: battles over voting rights, book bans, LGBTQ+ rights, immigration enforcement, and education policy define state politics.

FLORIDA'S ENDURING CHALLENGES

Climate Change & Sea Level Rise

Existential Threat

With more than 1,300 miles of coastline and vast low-lying areas, Florida is among the most climate-vulnerable states. Miami Beach already spends hundreds of millions raising roads. Scientists project parts of South Florida could be periodically inundated within decades. Florida's current political leadership has largely avoided the term "climate change" while the threat accelerates.

The Everglades Crisis

America's Wetland

The Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan — the largest environmental project in U.S. history — is underway but behind schedule. The ecosystem faces continued threats from agricultural runoff, urban encroachment, invasive species including Burmese pythons, and saltwater intrusion driven by sea level rise.

Housing & Affordability

Growth vs. Livability

Florida's population growth has driven housing costs to levels unaffordable for many long-term residents. Teachers, healthcare workers, and service industry employees — the people who make Florida function — are being priced out of the communities they serve. The same forces that drew millions to Florida now threaten the quality of life they came for.

Democracy & Civil Rights

Ongoing Struggles

Florida continues to be a battleground for voting rights, with ongoing battles over access to the ballot, felon re-enfranchisement, and the drawing of legislative districts. LGBTQ+ rights, immigration policy, and the teaching of Florida's full history in schools are among the most contested political issues of the current era.

FLORIDA NGSSS ALIGNMENT

SS.912.A.1.1	SS.912.A.1.2	SS.912.A.1.4	SS.912.A.2.1	SS.912.A.3.1
SS.912.A.4.1	SS.912.A.5.1	SS.912.A.6.1	SS.912.A.7.1	SS.912.W.1.3
SS.912.W.4.1	SS.912.G.1.2	SS.912.G.2.1	LAFS.910.RH.1.1	LAFS.910.WHST.1.1