

## BARTRAM'S ROYALS REPLANTED: THE ST. JOHNS EXPEDITION

By Mike Dahme

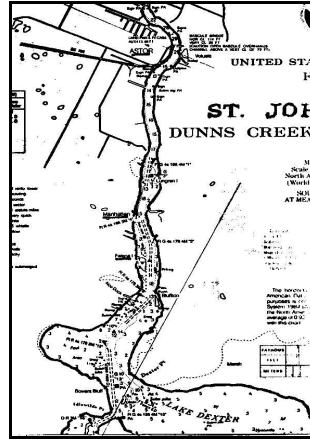
**“The palm** trees here seem to be of a different species from the Cabbage tree; their straight trunks are sixty, eighty or ninety feet high, with a beautiful taper of a bright ash colour, crowned with an orb of rich green plumed leaves: I have measured the stem of these plumes fifteen feet in length, besides the plume, which is nearly of the same length.”

**This one**, strangely punctuated sentence, not even comprising its own paragraph, has been the source of much conjecture in the two centuries since it was first published in 1791. That it is a description of the Florida Royal Palm (now *Roystonea regia*) has never been in question; rather, it is the mystery of how numbers (how many?) of this palm came to be present on the bank (which? or both?) of the St. Johns River a few miles south of present day Astor, some 230 miles or more north of the scattered portions of Collier, Monroe, and Dade Counties where the species was otherwise found in the state, that intrigues.

**The occasion** in spring or late summer<sup>1</sup> was not the author's first trip on this stretch of the St. Johns, however, for he had accompanied his father, John, on a trip seven years earlier, and the editor/commentator, Francis Harper, of *The Travels of William Bartram* (Naturalist's Edition, 1958) remarks that it was “astonishing” that Bartram *père* had made no record of the palms' presence. That he didn't, and he was at least as botanically-inclined as his son, implies that they weren't observable in 1765-6, something difficult to square with the presence of 60 foot plus tall palms “of a different species” a mere seven years later. For even if the trees were galloping along at a rate of five feet a year (probably do-able under ideal, tropical conditions), they still couldn't have attained that height by 1773. This contradiction is easily bridge, though, if one questions, as Harper does (in another context), William Bartram's eye: “It is well to remember, however, that Bartram is none too accurate in his general statements of dimensions and distances.” (p. 356)

**But still** the question remains, how did they get there? Generally, commentators like Harper have simply accepted this colony as though it were but a disjunct population, an outlier of the South Florida populations, and have speculated mostly as to its fate<sup>2</sup>—i.e., a wipe-out in the freeze of 1835 or a subsequent one.

**I suggest** that the specimens Bartram observed had been recently planted, whether by Indians or white men<sup>3</sup> and to test the theory, a small band of CFPSers set forth on a pontoon rental on a fine, pre-Hurricane Floyd, September morning. The short, three-mile



*The expedition that replanted royals on the St. Johns did so in this stretch of the river. Astor is at the top left of the chart. Manhattan (correct spelling) is middle left, with Lake Dexter at the bottom.*

stretch of the river between Astor (Hwy 40) and the opening of Lake Dexter (the “little lake” of Bartram's paragraph immediately following his noting of the Royal Palms) is largely undeveloped, one bank being part of a large water management reserve and the other verging on the Ocala National Forest. The west bank does have a small grouping of homes at the point at which the N.O.A.A. chart 11495 records as “Manhattan,” in the vicinity of which Harper wrote that Bartram camped his first night out after leaving his base of “Spaulding's Upper Store” (Astor). The following morning, somewhere in the mile-long stretch between Manhattan and the lake, is when he sighted the Royals, and it is in that stretch that we planted about 40 palms, mostly Florida Royals (and a smattering of hardier species, *Livistona saribus* and *Arenga pinnata*), but also, for no reason other than availability, three Puerto Rican Royals (*R. borinquena*).

**The river** banks, as well as a sizeable island (Falana, not mentioned by Bartram, perhaps a Corps of Engineers creation), are mostly low and swampy, but Royals appear to like wet soil and, per the chart, there's only a six-inch rise and fall of the river level. So our task was quickly accomplished and next year we'll be back with a sack of Leonard's “palm special” to succor the survivors. The river's wide and will moderate all but the worst of cold fronts to the extent that survival, once plants are established, may well be possible for a number of years. But whether due to cold, hurricanes, or just lightning, it's as doubtful now as it was 226 years ago that anyone will see 60-90 foot tall Royals, so far from habitat, on the upper St. Johns.

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