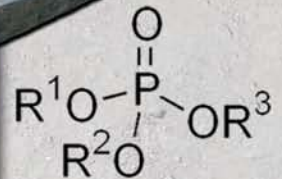


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## The Discovery of Phosphate

### Florida's "Gold Rush"

Phosphate, a naturally occurring mineral, greatly impacted the lives of our forbearers here in Floral City and had much to do with the development and modern appearance of our town. Soon after the Civil War ended, evidence of a small amount of low grade phosphate was found in northern Florida at a limestone quarry in Hawthorne. Nothing much came of it until two decades later when a deposit of hard-rock phosphate was discovered near Dunnellon in 1889, followed by another one near Floral City. Geologists quickly found several more deposits in the area and it was soon realized that the sites were all part of a single geological rock phosphate ridge that runs parallel to the gulf coast and extends from Suwannee County southward through the eastern part of Citrus County to Hernando County.



The discovery of this valuable commodity in our region of Florida was fortuitous, because the citrus industry that had been the basis of the local economy was totally destroyed by the Great Freeze of 1894/95. The mining of phosphate heralded something similar to the California Gold Rush as land speculation and the influx of fortune seekers created a "Wild West" atmosphere that lasted for several decades. By the beginning of the 20th century, the phosphate boom of north and west central Florida was in full swing and the strategically located new town of Floral City became the commercial center for the mining companies in Citrus County. Floral City grew tremendously as a result of this new industry and the population quickly grew to nearly 10,000 people.

Recruiters travelled throughout the southeast to hire laborers for the mines. Initially, the mining was done with picks and shovels, and the larger rocks of pure phosphate were broken up with hand-held sledge hammers. This work was physically demanding and conditions could sometimes be quite dangerous. The workers generally earned a dollar a day, except for the convicts who were leased to the mines by the Citrus County Correctional Institution. By the early 1900s, a large amount of the excavation work was done by huge steam-powered shovels, which being both more economical and efficient, eliminated the slave-like labor conditions of the hand-worked mines.

Many fortunes were made and lost by speculators and investors during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The phosphate boom was suddenly terminated by World War I, when exports to European buyers were stopped. Since there was no other significant economic endeavor to take its place at this time, most of the businesses folded and the population plummeted.

Several of the mines reopened after the cessation of hostilities in Europe, but there was only limited demand for the local hard rock phosphate. Although local phosphate mining lasted until the 1960s, it became much more economical to mine the immense deposits of pebble phosphate which had been discovered in the south central part of the state.