

The Cleveland Connection: Revelations from the John D. Rockefeller — Julia D. Tuttle Correspondence

By Edward N. Akin*

There are many facets to the founding of Miami. Most historical material in the past has concentrated on the principals in the event: Julia D. Tuttle as the “Mother of Miami” and Henry M. Flagler, Standard Oil associate of John D. Rockefeller and Florida railroad builder, as the “Father of Miami.” Also, historians have noted the prominent role of William and Mary Brickell, who were responsible—along with Mrs. Tuttle—for giving Flagler large tracts of land to induce him to build his railroad to Miami.¹ From the collections at the Rockefeller Archive Center in North Tarrytown, New York, this author has pieced together correspondence between John D. Rockefeller and Julia D. Tuttle which indicates her evolving commitment to Florida.

John D. Rockefeller’s association with Julia Tuttle was a long and productive one — at least for Mrs. Tuttle and her philanthropic activities. Mrs. Tuttle’s father-in-law had been Rockefeller’s first boss, having been associated with the mercantile and grain commission business of Hewitt & Tuttle which hired the young Cleveland (Ohio) high school graduate after his completion of a brief business course. During the formative years of the Standard Oil Company in the 1860s and 1870s, Mrs. Tuttle and Rockefeller were both members of the Euclid Avenue Baptist Church in Cleveland. By the 1880s Rockefeller was in New York most of the time, but he maintained close ties with his Cleveland friends. From time to

*Dr. Akin is an assistant professor of history, Mississippi College, Clinton, Miss. He holds a grant from Rockefeller University for a study of Henry M. Flagler.

time Mrs. Tuttle solicited Mr. Rockefeller's aid for her favorite charities. On one occasion, he stated to Mrs. Tuttle that he was unable to serve on the board of directors for the Women's Repository, which seemed to have been a home for unwed mothers; however, he did send her a fifty-dollar contribution for the institution.²

With the death of her husband in February 1886, Mrs. Tuttle requested a new kind of assistance from Rockefeller. Although she had visited her father in the Miami area as early as 1874, she was now considering a new kind of Florida venture, which would need some assistance from Rockefeller. In a letter dated December 20, 1886 (with a black border to indicate her period of mourning), Mrs. Tuttle wrote Rockefeller the following:

I shall need to do something to increase my income somewhat and I have been thinking of getting something to do for a part of the year in a more genial climate.

Now if you think I am equal to such an undertaking I think I would like the position of housekeeper with the new hotel Mr. Flagler is building at St. Augustine and if you would be good enough to recommend me to Mr. Flagler I am sure your good word would do much to induce him to give me a trial. Of course you may not think this is a feasible project at all, but you can easily say so. As I understand it the building will not be completed until next season but I thought if one was going to get the position it was time to be moving in the matter.

I would like to take my daughter Fannie to a milder climate for she is not quite as well as I wish she was. There is nothing alarming but I want to avoid any trouble for her. If I am all wrong about this it will do no harm to know it, and perhaps you know of something else it will be better for me to do only I could not do what would confine me constantly indoors or at a desk.³

Rockefeller quickly acted on Mrs. Tuttle's request. He informed her a week later, in a letter of December 27, 1886:

Yours of the 20th at hand and I will see Mr. Flagler as requested and advise you. If you are in good health I have no doubt you could fill the position referred to providing any other woman could, and I will say the same to him.

I will gladly communicate with you if anything in any other direction presents itself that might seem to be favorable for you. I congratulate you on your success in administering your own affairs. Hope you can so shape your investments as to give you the necessary income with less hard work.⁴

Two days later Rockefeller informed Tuttle of Flagler's response:

I have spoken to Mr. Flagler. He will not give any personal attention to the running of his hotel when it is completed, and is of the opinion that his Manager, Mr. Seavey, has arranged in respect to the position you refer to. His address is, O.D. Seavey, St. Augustine, Fla.

I wish I had at my command the position you want.

I may be in Cleveland within a few weeks, and if so, will try to see you.⁵

In responding to Rockefeller's note, Mrs. Tuttle indicated she had written Seavey in any case: "Nothing may come of it but there was no harm in trying."⁶ Indeed, nothing did come of it; but Mrs. Tuttle was now definitely intrigued by the prospects of investment in Florida. A year lapsed before her next correspondence with Rockefeller. By that time she was dividing her time between Cleveland and her newly-acquired land holdings at Ft. Dallas, near the mouth of the Miami River.

Mrs. Tuttle began to hear exciting rumors concerning Rockefeller. She wrote him on March 6, 1888:

Yesterday in a letter from Florida I heard that you were about buying a tract of land in Fla. but what most interested me was the fact that only a narrow river divides it from my own property — So I could not but *hope* it was true and that we might be winter neighbors; for another winter will find me & mine in Fla.

If you are thinking of investing down there do tell me about it. I think Fla. will become my headquarters —

At present my plans are in a most chaotic state. My mother's health has been failing all winter and now she is confined to her room and most of the time to her bed. I feel very anxious about her for at her age (this month is so trying). Had she been well as in former years we should even now be in Italy but owing to her illness I was obliged to change my plans. I have rented the property here at least the house and I am hoping for a rest and change after my long work time. I have carried my point and now I am ready to stop. If I had been able to sell part of this as I would like I should have been well pleased but I can carry it now I think so it is no doubt but as it is. I get very weary of it all sometimes and wonder if it all pays.

Well I shall know how to appreciate rest when it comes and that is what those who never work cannot do.

I hope your family are all quite well and that you enjoyed your trip abroad. By the way, I was much amused to read in a *Painesville* paper last summer that Mrs. Fred Tuttle was travelling with Mr. Rockefeller's family in Europe. How it got there remains a mystery, but then newspaper items often are mysterious.

To conclude I only hope it is *time* that you are going to invest in South Fla. I can think of no one that I would prefer for a neighbor.⁷

Two weeks later Rockefeller quashed the rumor:

It was a mistake about my purchasing property in Florida. I hope your venture there will prove successful. I am just returned from Cleveland and regret to hear your Mother was quite ill. I congratulate you on the success of your efforts to save your property and cannot say too much in your praise for the battle you have made. We hope to see you on returning to Cleveland after a few weeks and hope before this your Mother is better, and that you will enjoy a good rest after your long and hard struggle.⁸

By the end of 1889, Mrs. Tuttle had decided to completely sever her Cleveland ties and live in South Florida on a permanent basis. She wrote Rockefeller on December 7:

I hoped I should hear something from Mr. Cowles in reference to the sale of my property here [Cleveland] but I have not seen him or heard from him. Do you think I had best go to see him?

I am very sorry you were out when I called and had I known just when I could call should have dropped you a line —

I am as much troubled as ever about my business and I confess I do not quite see how it is coming out.

Fannie is going to Fla. with her Grandma Tuttle and leaves the 16th— After that I think I shall close the house and go and stay with my friends at Lakewood going South later for a short time —

If you can induce Mr. Cowles to take up that matter I hope you will and please let me know if I am to call upon him or to wait his movements—⁹

With a new home and life style established, Mrs. Tuttle returned to one of her early ties with Rockefeller: their common concern with philanthropy. She solicited, and received from Rockefeller a \$50 donation for a Baptist Church in Miami.¹⁰

This correspondence only offers a brief glimpse into the “Cleveland connection” which played a role in the founding of Miami. William and Mary Brickell had lived in Cleveland before their family’s move to Florida. James Ingraham, who had worked for both the Plant System and Flagler to encourage a rail link to Miami, was from Cleveland. Flagler had spent his formative years with Standard Oil in Cleveland. Of course, Mrs. Tuttle and Mr. Rockefeller had roots firmly planted in Cleveland.

NOTES

1. For a full discussion of Flagler's role in the founding of Miami, see Edward Nelson Akin, *Southern Reflection of the Gilded Age: Henry M. Flagler and His System, 1885-1913*, Ph.D. dissertation, University of Florida, 1975.

2. John D. Rockefeller to Julia D. Tuttle, January 24 and September 30, 1884, JDR Letterbook 6, Rockefeller Archive Center. All subsequent material is from the Rockefeller Archive Center.

3. Tuttle to Rockefeller, December 20, 1886, Record Group 1, Incoming Correspondence, Office, MS Box 47 (Office, 1879-1894). All correspondence from Tuttle to Rockefeller is in this place.

4. Rockefeller to Tuttle, December 27, 1886, JDR Lb. 12.

5. *Ibid.*, December 29, 1886.

6. Tuttle to Rockefeller, January 7, 1887.

7. *Ibid.*, March 6, 1888.

8. Rockefeller to Tuttle, March 19, 1888, JDR Lb. 16.

9. Tuttle to Rockefeller, December 7, 1889.

10. Rockefeller to Tuttle, May 21, 1892, JDR Lb. 31.

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