

SURF, SAND, AND POSTCARD SUNSETS

*A History of Pass-a-Grille
and the Gulf Beaches*

Frank T. Hurley, Jr.

*DEDICATED TO MY MOTHER FOR
HER ENCOURAGEMENT AND HELP*

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Welcome sign at the beach end of McAdoo Bridge, circa 1921.

(Courtesy Gulf Beaches Historical Museum).

IT'S NOW ST. PETE BEACH

St. Petersburg Beach's citizens in 1994 voted to give their city a new name — St. Pete Beach. Reason for the change was to avoid confusion with mainland St. Petersburg. However, most residents as well as visitors usually called it "St. Pete Beach" and so a name change was perhaps inevitable, but the name "St. Petersburg Beach" in this revised edition remains unchanged.

SPECIAL NOTE

Present-day street addresses and geographical names are used to identify houses where early residents lived and places where important events occurred. For example, the address of Sea Call, Edwin H. Tomlinson's home, is given as 108 Pass-a-Grille Way even though houses were not numbered when it was built, and Pass-a-Grille Way was known as Florida Avenue then. Another example: the islands that Claude Saunders homesteaded in 1886 are identified as Treasure Island, Isle of Palms, and Isle of Capri. The names, of course, are modern names; the three islands were unnamed in Saunders' time.

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FRANK T. HURLEY, JR.

PASS-A-GRILLE: WHERE IT ALL BEGAN

There is a place called Pass-a-Grille.

It has surf, sand, and postcard sunsets. Describing those sunsets bankrupts the English language, and its sugary white beach may be the whitest to be found on any island.

From the sea, the island village comes up suddenly, like a mirage. At first, there is only the expanse of the Gulf of Mexico itself, the sky, and sea birds wheeling overhead. And then, all at once—there it is: the squared contour of the Don Ce-Sar Hotel resembling a pink stucco wedding cake and, southward, a ribbon of beach and a fringe of stumpy houses stark against a cerulean sky.

Old Pass-a-Grille, 31 blocks long and one block wide, clings to the Gulf, crowds against the strand, its potpourri of buildings jostling for space on the limited expanse of sand. Visitors call the effect quaint, an adjective that makes residents wince. Nearly everyone agrees, however, that the place has “character.”

One of those with such an opinion was Robert Ripley of “Believe It or Not” fame, who visited Pass-a-Grille when there was less neon, less people, and more hibiscus, palms, and oleanders. He called block-long Eighth Avenue, which passes as a business street, “America’s shortest and most beautiful main street.”

Merchant prince John Wanamaker, who did not gush often, did so over Pass-a-Grille. “I have traveled pretty much all over this old world of ours,” he stated, “but I have found no place so adapted to the getting and enjoying of good health and entertainment as Pass-a-Grille.”

A municipality for 46 years, Pass-a-Grille is now part of the City of St. Petersburg Beach politically, but not spiritually. St. Petersburg Beach has its own colorful history with an engaging cast of characters, but it is mostly a product of the period following World War II when vacationers began discovering Florida’s other side—the West Coast. Once they sampled this area’s warmth, friendliness, and its sandy, shell-strewn beaches, visitors came back for more and brought others with them.

At last count, the island city had managed to squeeze 10,032 permanent residents onto six miles of island with little more than two

square miles of land area, slightly more than four miles of beach, 24.6 miles of bay frontage, much of which was created by finger fills, and was host to its share of the booming Pinellas County tourist business which averages 5,000,000 visitors per year. Fortunately, not all visitors arrive at the same time.

Old Pass-a-Grille is now full of years (more than a hundred), and according to residents, as comfortable to be in as a pair of well-worn slippers. As mainland St. Petersburg's first-born beach resort, it is the bequeather of the tradition. Its story, and those of St. Petersburg Beach and nine other beach towns, are intertwined.

Some basic facts about the islands may help to place them into proper perspective for a newcomer.

The Gulf Beaches comprise a string of narrow barrier islands in the Gulf of Mexico created by the timeless surge of winds and waves. Unlike the true Florida keys from Key Largo to Key West that are exposed tops of dead coral reefs, St. Petersburg's Gulf Beaches are marl, shell, and sand compacted over the centuries and topped by a veneer of soil and plant life.

Separating the islands from the Pinellas peninsula, which St. Petersburg dominates, is a shallow body of water called Boca Ciega Bay. The "Boca Ciega" name pops up recurrently. Literally, "boca" is Spanish for "mouth" while "ciega" means "blind." The way it is used locally, however, the name probably means "obstructed." Sixteenth century Spaniards, seeking a way to sail into the bay, may have found entry impassable because of its shallowness.

Technically, the beaches begin where the Gulf and Tampa Bay meet at Egmont Key, the check-in-and-checkout point for big ships. This island is in another county—Hillsborough—and government-owned except for the Tampa Bay pilot station. From Egmont's lighthouse, the islands extend north approximately 20 nautical miles toward Little Pass and the island of Clearwater Beach. The main component parts, south to north, are three in number—Long Key, Treasure Island, and Sand Key.

Long Key and St. Petersburg Beach are one and the same as that city now occupies the entire island. Until 1957, four incorporated towns—Pass-a-Grille Beach, Don Ce-Sar Place, Belle Vista Beach, and St. Petersburg Beach—shared Long Key with several unincorporated enclaves.

Two years before the municipalities of Long Key merged, consolidation took place on Treasure Island, the middle and smallest of the three islands. Once there were four towns, Sunset Beach, Boca Ciega City, Treasure Island, and Sunshine Beach.

Longest of all is Sand Key, occasionally called Madeira Island. It consists of eight municipalities known as Madeira Beach, Redington Beach, North Redington Beach, Redington Shores, Indian Shores (until August, 1973, Indian Rocks Beach South Shores), Indian Rocks Beach, Belleair Shores, and Belleair Beach.

Between each key or island is a “pass,” defined by Webster as a “swift flowing body of water.” There are four such passes.

“Pass-a-Grille” refers not only to the old town of that name but also to the pass at the southern end of Long Key that gave the town its name in the 1890’s. To heighten confusion, both are sometimes referred to as “The Pass.”

Blind Pass, which the Spaniards knew as Boca Ceiga Pass, separates Long Key and Treasure Island.

A fabled spot for bridge anglers is John’s Pass, between Treasure Island and Sand Key. From the bridge catwalk, from boats, from docks, and from seawalls devout anglers engage in their favorite pastime day and night, often oblivious to the elements.

Finally, at the extreme north end of Sand Key between Belleair Beach and Clearwater Beach, there is Little Pass.

Linking the keys to each other and to the mainland are ten causeways. No statistics are available concerning how many cars cross the nine free bridges daily, but more than 24,000 vehicles per day, according to best estimates, use the Bayway, the only toll bridge.

Only one road—Gulf Boulevard where “traffic” is sometimes spelled “terrific” — extends the length of the islands from 31st Avenue in St. Petersburg Beach to Little Pass. South of 31st Avenue to the pass it is Pass-a-Grille Way.

The entire miscellany is customarily referred to as the Gulf Beaches, sometimes as the Holiday Isles. At Redington Shores, St. Petersburg’s economic influence fades; north of Redington Shores the influence becomes Clearwater’s. Inferring, however, that beach towns are satellites of either St. Petersburg or Clearwater is a gaucherie no less reprehensible than despoilation of a holy shrine.

The United States Census of 2000 gave the Gulf Beaches’ population as 35,750.

Based on that figure, 20 of Florida's 67 counties had less people than the Gulf Beaches. Or, to put it another way, if the Gulf Beaches were Florida's 68th county, it would be 48th in population but 68th in land area.

About 700 years ago, people began coming to the islands for a variety of reasons, not all of them noble. This is the story of some of those people who came, and some of the events, commonplace and tumultuous, that occurred after they arrived. Each story is an integral piece of the Gulf Beach mosaic.

BOOK ONE

. . . We did most of our camping and hunting at Pass-a-Grille on account of that good well of water and the campground. Besides, there were more deer on Long Key. . .

John A. Bethell, early settler

CHAPTER ONE

THE FIRST BEACHGOERS

Although the sands hold no evidence of their occupation today, aboriginal Indians who called themselves by a name that sounded to the Spaniards like “Timucua” once prowled St. Petersburg’s Gulf Beaches.

Jean Ribault, a French explorer of Florida’s East Coast, described them as brown, almost naked people of “good stature, well-shaped of body as any people in the world: very gentle, courteous and good natured, of tawny skin, hawked nose, and of pleasant countenance.” The description is probably accurate, but one may question Ribault’s reference to their good nature and gentleness. When aroused, Florida’s Indians could make Sitting Bull seem like Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm.

Shards (pieces of broken pottery) dug from Timucuan burial mounds near the beaches have been classified by archeologists as Late Weeden Island and as Safety Harbor cultural epochs beginning about 1100 or 1200 A.D. and ending perhaps 500 years later.

Precursors of the Timucuan may have been around earlier, possibly 10,000 years ago, when the last ice age waters were draining off Florida. What was identified as a Late Pleistocene arrow point was found a few years ago near Indian Rocks Beach in material dredged from the bay.

The find-if authentic-indicated a nomadic hunter came to the

beach area perhaps seeking mammoth or bison.

The first beach visitors were an unsophisticated lot who had gotten the hang of agriculture by the time the Spanish arrived, but never understood the principle of the wheel. To hungry Timucuan whose diet was shellfish and fish, supplemented with game and wild plants, the keys and off shore waters were Pre-Columbian supermarkets.

In half a millennium of Lucullan dining, the Timucuan littered Boca Ciega Bay's shoreline with kitchen middens—heaps of discarded shells. There are still a few middens on the mainland, but the last Timucuan garbage dumps on the islands were obliterated in 1961 when bulldozers cleared Pine Key and Cabbage Key for development.

The earliest description of a West Coast village was provided by a member of the Hernando de Soto expedition that landed near Ucita on June 1, 1539. Most historians believe Ucita, by Timucuan standards a metropolis, was located on Tampa Bay in Manatee County ten nautical miles south and slightly southeast of Pass-a-Grille.

Written anonymously by a Portuguese knight known as the “Gentleman of Elvas” the narrative described Ucita as “seven or eight houses, built of timber, and covered with palm leaves. The chief's house stood near the beach, upon a very high mount (mound) made by hand for defense: at the other end of the town was a temple, on the roof of which perched a wooden fowl with gilded eyes.” Mounds and middens marked village sites for archeologists in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Their excavations revealed several types of mounds—burial or ceremonial mounds, habitation sites, and simple shell heaps.

Shortly before the Civil War, early settlers John A. Bethell and Anderson Wood discovered a burial mound while hunting on an island inside John's Pass. Bethell, in his memoirs published in 1914, said they would have “passed by it unnoticed as it only had the appearance of a ridge of shell and sand had we not espied two human skulls and some bones.” Hoping to find “trinkets,” the youths dug into the mound, Bethell said, but “all we unearthed were bones—skeletons buried three tiers deep, heads north and feet south.”

Bethell and Wood were husky six footers, yet when they compared an exhumed thigh bone to their own, theirs was two inches shorter. One jaw bone was so large Wood could slip it off and on his whiskery face

with ease.

As they handled the bones, they began speculating whether the Indians died in battle or of disease. If the latter happened, the youths concluded, some “germs might still be lurking around those old bones.” “We covered the mound up again and left, taking the skull, jaw and thigh bones to Tampa and gave them to Dr. Creighton as he wanted to send them to the Smithsonian Institution at Washington,” Bethell said. “We also gave him two petrified teeth and several rib bones (of animals) that we found on the outside beach at Pass-a-Grille.”

Ignoring rattlesnakes, mosquitoes, and jeers from Cracker settlers who called them, among other epithets, “pot hunters,” pioneer archeologists S.T. Walker and Clarence E. Moore excavated the John’s Pass mound and mounds on Elnor Key, Isle of Capri, Long Key, and Pine Key. Walker, a Clearwater resident, was on the scene in 1880, Moore in 1900 and again in 1903.

So overgrown with trees and shrubs that its outline could barely be distinguished, the Long Key mound, when Walker saw it, had a haunting sense of sadness about it as if it were brooding over its mysterious past. The mound was of white sand, about 100 feet long, just under four feet in height, and had a maximum breadth of 70 feet. Walker thought it was shaped like a turtle.

Effigy or image mounds, usually low hummocks of earth modeled by their builders in the form of animals, men or abstract figures, are presumed to have been sacred idols, perhaps. Such mounds are common in the Midwest but seldom found anywhere else. If Walker was correct, St. Petersburg Beach’s turtle mound was an archeological rarity for Florida.

No artifacts or shards were ever uncovered. Moore, however, found a skeleton about two feet below the surface. The recent appearance of the bones made him suspect they were “intrusive”-in the jargon of archeology, objects that do not belong where they are found.

If Moore’s educated guess was correct, someone may have hidden a body in the mound, hoping that if it were ever uncovered, the finder would assume the bones to be those of a long dead Timucuan. Did Moore uncover a grisly murder? If so, who hid the victim in the mound?

The answer was never forthcoming.

No trace of Long Key's mystery mound exists today, nor does anyone know exactly where it was located. The late Walter Fuller, a well-regarded regional historian and Long Key developer, once said it was somewhere near "downtown St. Petersburg Beach." Moore, however, provided a better clue:

"About midway from the extremities of the island, a strip of land makes into the bay in a southeast direction. About half a mile from the end of this strip, in thick growth, is the mound, to which only good luck or a guide can lead one." This description fits St. Petersburg Beach's Belle Vista section.

About the same time Moore was probing the enigmatic Long Key mound, 12 to 14 skulls were unearthed on the northeast end of Pine Key. Jagged holes in the skulls hinted at violent, ugly death.

Capt. Kenneth B. Merry, a Pass-a-Grille resident since 1900, visited the site many times during his adventurous boyhood. Like other island boys, he sometimes went "bone hunting" when the fishing was bad.

"This was not a burial mound," he told Paul A. Davis, columnist for the St. Petersburg Evening Independent, in an interview a few years ago. "It appeared more like a battle field where a number of fighters had fallen to be buried later by sands and silt and vegetation brought in by time and the tides." As the spot was along an eroding shoreline, high water and storms often uncovered bones less than a foot below the surface, but no artifacts were found. Because of the moisture, bones were badly preserved, usually crumbling after being exposed to the air.

Some believed the bones were not Indian bones but those of Spaniards slain by Indians. The belief supposedly was based on a Smithsonian anthropologist's opinion.

Of all mounds near the beaches, the largest and most imposing was hidden in jungle-like growth on Cabbage Key, an island in Boca Ciega Bay half a mile east of Pass-a-Grille. It was an oval sand heap six to eight feet high and 100 feet wide, sprawled east of what Clarence Moore called a "duck pond" on the east side of the key. To one side was a gully about five feet deep and nearly 100 feet long which may have supplied sand for construction. When visited, the burial mound, like all mounds, loosed a flood of speculation about its origin and the fate of its builders.

While exchanging banter with some fishermen camping on Pass-a-Grille, Moore is supposed to have told them that he suspected the Cabbage Key mound builders were not Indians but descendants of the ten lost tribes of Israel carried off into Assyrian captivity about 722 B.C. The preposterous story somehow survived for years, a curious bit of local folklore.

For nearly 500 years, the deep sleep of long dead Timucuan was undisturbed except by picnickers and an occasional amateur archeologist.

Then the State of Florida decided to build a span from the Pinellas Bayway to Mullet Key (now Ft. DeSoto Park).

The route was over the Cabbage Key mound.

Arriving a few days before the bulldozers, Dr. William H. Sears, then assistant curator of the Florida State Museum in Gainesville, excavated the mound in May, 1961. The mound, he reported, "was unusual." A carpet of pottery fragments (probably intended as a ceremonial offering) was removed and beneath that were skeletons-36 of them.

"Burials in the mound were apparently put in by pits dug down from the surface, which is not common in this area," Dr. Sears explained to curiosity seekers kibitzing his trowel work.

Belching diesel fumes into the warm spring air, earth moving machines chugged over the mound moments after Dr. Sears carted away his last box of bones and artifacts.

Sometime later, the state erected a handsome roadside marker close to the site of what it chose to call, as a sop to the real estate developers, the "Tierra Verde Mound." Thus taking its identity was the white man's final indignity to the Cabbage Key mound.

CHAPTER TWO

CARAVELS AND CONQUISTADORES

“We came here to serve God, and also to get rich.” So wrote Bernal Diaz del Castillo, the conquistadores’ apologist-laureate, explaining what brought Spain’s paladins of discovery to the New World in the 16th century.

While enlarging the kingdom of the cross and lusting for gold, someone—perhaps Juan Ponce de Leon in 1513—found Florida. Some think he was also the first European to see the Gulf Beaches, but this honor probably belongs to Diego Miruelo.

An often told tale with no more substance than a mince pie inspired nightmare has Ponce de Leon, fabled seeker of the fountain of youth, careening his flagship, the San Cristobal, at Mullet Key in 1513. While his men were scraping barnacles, Indians attacked, killing a Spaniard who became perhaps the first white man to die in battle in North America.

The story goes on to relate how Ponce de Leon, itching to get even with the Indians, returned to Mullet Key during his second voyage along the Gulf Coast in 1521, and in the return bout with the Timucuan was mortally wounded by an arrow.

The story reads well except most historians believe Ponce de Leon actually reached Florida’s West Coast at Charlotte Harbor 65

miles south of Tampa Bay.

Miruelo's case is stronger.

On a trading cruise from Cuba in 1516, Miruelo ran up the West Coast and discovered a bay, perhaps Pensacola, which on some early maps bore his name. Sailing close to shore, as was the custom of that day, Miruelo would have glimpsed the Gulf Beaches and may have landed on one of the islands to trade with Indians.

Whatever he found ashore must have impressed him, for when he returned to Santo Domingo he boasted of the "riches of that land (Florida) and of the islands he had beholden." The only trouble was that Miruelo was not sure exactly where he had been.

Hopeful that a whiff of salt air in Miruelo's nostrils might jog his memory, Lucas Vasquez de Ayllon, a judge of the royal tribunal in Santo Domingo, fitted out three ships and, with Miruelo as navigator, sailed for Florida in 1524. But Miruelo could not find his islands again and, according to Garcilaso de la Vega, a chronicler of de Soto, he "fell into such a melancholia that in a few days he lost his reason and expired."

As a member of Francisco Hernandez de Cordova's expedition, Bernal Diaz del Castillo landed on Florida in 1517, though not by choice. Homeward bound to Havana after a disastrous foray into Mexico, thirst-parched survivors of the expedition came ashore on a Florida West Coast islet seeking water.

And, in 1519, Juan Alonzo de Pineda, commanding four caravels of Francisco de Garay, governor of Jamaica, made landings while mapping the Gulf shoreline as far as present-day Texas. He would have at least seen the beaches.

On Tuesday of Holy Week, April 12, 1528 the caravels of Panfilo de Narvaez anchored off Pass-a-Grille for two days of reconnoitring before beginning the first exploration of the North American continent. De Narvaez, who never wasted time trying on halos for size, was a poor choice as expedition leader.

Napoleon, so the story goes, always asked "Is he lucky?" when considering an officer for high command. Had Spain's Emperor Charles V asked whether Lady Luck smiled consistently upon de Narvaez, that red-bearded, one-eyed hidalgo from Castille would have remained a subaltern forever. For de Narvaez's career had as many downs as ups.

An otherwise stolid, commonsensical monarch, Charles rewarded de Narvaez for botching an assignment in Mexico (de Narvaez lost an eye in the affray, also his army) by granting him 600 men, five ships, and a patent to explore, colonize, and govern Florida. A shipwreck, then desertions in Santo Domingo and in Cuba, prompted, it was said, by hardships of the voyage and by de Narvaez's harshness, thinned the expedition's ranks before it made the landfall.

De Narvaez's pilot was another Diego Miruelo, nephew and namesake of the aforementioned Miruelo. While sailing with Pineda, he had seen Tampa Bay and was steering de Narvaez to it. How he overshot the southwest channel into Tampa Bay between Egmont and Passage Keys and found Pass-a-Grille is conjectural. Sympathetic colleagues blamed an early morning sea fog; those less charitable suggested Miruelo had inherited the name and prestige of his uncle, but not Uncle Diego's seamanship. (Seafarers thought well of Miruelo the elder despite his occasional mental lapses.) Finding the pass too shallow (a caravel drew about eight feet of water), Miruelo inched de Narvaez's ships north along the beaches to John's Pass, or perhaps Blind Pass, and sailed into a quiet body of water. De Narvaez called it "Baia de la Cruz" (Bay of the Cross), now Boca Ciega Bay.

In a rare prudent moment, de Narvaez sent a clerk, Alonso Enriquez, to an island to look around, presumably regarding him more expendable than a first-class swordsman. Enriquez, however, was strong on public relations.

When he and his party found Indians, Enriquez made friendly gestures and received a good-will gift of fish and venison from them.

Where did Enriquez land? Perhaps Madeira Beach or Treasure Island, assuming Miruelo sailed through John's Pass. But, if Miruelo entered Blind Pass, Enriquez might have landed on St. Petersburg Beach's north shore near Devil's Elbow.

Then there are the maverick historians who insist the expedition did not enter either pass. They contend de Narvaez's actual landing site was St. Clement's Point, now Indian Rocks.

Encouraged by Enriquez's reception (wherever it happened), de Narvaez put his expedition ashore the following day, Good Friday, April 15, in St. Petersburg's Jungle section near a Timucuan village.

Once ashore, the expedition did not tarry long. Hints by the Timucuans that gold could be found at Apalachee, somewhere in North Florida, sent the Spaniards scurrying off into the interior where, as historian James Grant Forbes so quaintly put it, they were “destructively opposed by the Indians.” Eight years and two months after the fleet hove to off Pass-a-Grille, Alvar Nunez Cabeza de Vaca, the expedition’s high sheriff and treasurer, and three companions wearily plodded into Mexico City with an incredible tale of hardships encountered in traveling afoot thousands of miles of hostile country never before glimpsed by white men.

At the behest of de Narvaez’s wife, a ship searched Boca Ciega Bay in 1529 or 1530 without finding any traces of the Spaniards. If it had not provided Florida with its own version of the more familiar John Smith-Pocahontas story, the mission would have been a complete loss. Somewhere between St. Petersburg Beach and Indian Rocks, Indians duped four sailors into coming ashore. Three were quickly butchered, but the fourth, Juan Ortiz, an 18-year-old Seville native with a hankering for high adventure, was spared by Chief Hirrighua when the chief’s wife and three daughters begged for his life.

Nearly ten years later, in June, 1539, Hernando de Soto’s men found Ortiz dwelling with the Timucuans. Jubilant at being rescued, Ortiz joined de Soto as an interpreter. His luck ran out, however, and he died of fever during the winter of 1539-40 as the expedition camped somewhere in Louisiana.

On a Gulf islet near Tampa Bay, de Soto’s advance man, Juan de Anasco, and his crew survived for two months on a diet of “sea snails and booby birds” after a shipwreck in late 1538. Before leaving Havana, de Soto had sent ahead two ships under de Anasco to scout Florida’s West Coast for a good harbor. The main body of the expedition reached Tampa Bay May 25, 1539.

For some unknown reason, de Soto did not venture far into Tampa Bay. Thus Mullet Key was as close as he got to the Gulf Beaches. Legend says he exercised his massive Andalusian horses for a day or two on the island before the Spaniards landed at Ucita.

Spain’s enthusiasm for the West Coast cooled after de Soto’s expedition, in keeping with a fine old Spanish tradition in Florida,

failed. There were, to be sure, unplanned visits by shipwrecked sailors, slavers, missionaries, and minor league pirates, but no more expeditions in the grand manner.

For two centuries after de Soto, the Gulf Beaches were little more than fly specks on mariners' charts. Indian Rocks Beach made early Spanish maps as Cabo San Ignazio and English maps as St. Clement's Point. Other early landmarks were Restinga Larga, the long shoal southwest of Pass-a-Grille, Egmont Key, and Anclote Key near Tarpon Springs.

Though the islands in the 1500's were by no means devoid of white men, only one authenticated Spanish artifact has ever been found. In 1918, workmen clearing land to build Mrs. Amelia Williams' new home at 612 Pass-a-Grille Way found a 16th century Spanish ewer, a type of water jar.

Mrs. Williams' daughter, Louise (Mrs. Roy) Ayres, said the relic ended up in the Smithsonian.

More than 60 years after de Soto had gone to glory, Pedro de Ybarra, Florida's governor from 1603-09, sent a frigate, under the command of Capt. Fernando Valdez, to the West Coast to see what, if anything, was going on there.

On his return to St. Augustine, Captain Valdez reported finding no Europeans colonizing the governor's untidy backyard, but guessed that a few shipwrecked sailors might be living on the islands among the Timucuan.

Ybarra was satisfied. And the Florida West Coast and the Gulf Beaches were virtually undisturbed by Spain for about 132 years.

CHAPTER THREE

ISLANDS IN A SPANISH LAKE

From the time of Ponce de Leon, Spain believed that the Gulf of Mexico was a Spanish lake, a rosy conviction shaken at times by the intrusions of France and of Great Britain on the upper Gulf Coast. It remained, however, for a privateer from the Georgia colony to shatter the Spanish lake concept beyond repair in the mid 18th Century.

This privateer, a shadowy figure known as Captain Braddock, is thought to have been the first Englishman to explore Tampa Bay, or Bahia Espiritu Santo (Bay of the Holy Spirit) as it was then called.

Hoping to nip off Spanish shipping in the Gulf, Braddock sailed from Savannah about 1744 or 1745 with two ships, the *Castor* and the *Pollux*, named after Roman mythology's twin gods who were the patron deities of mariners. Although main shipping lanes were south of Tampa Bay, the shallow bays and low lying islands comprising today's Gulf Beaches made good hideaways. Here Braddock's crews could replenish water and food supplies and, reasonably safe from detection, could careen the ships for bottom repairs. When privateering was slow, Captain Braddock mapped and sounded Tampa Bay, explored its adjacent waters and prowled among the beach islands. As late as 1800, navigators regarded his map as being as good as any extant. Clio,

the muse of history, was unkind to Captain Braddock, for he is not mentioned in most histories, his map disappeared from British archives, and even his first name remains uncertain.

The neglected privateer may have been one David Cutler Braddock. Georgia's colonial records contain at least a dozen references to a privateer of that name who preyed on French shipping in the mid 1750's. Privateering must have been profitable for he retired from the sea, bought a plantation on the Ogeechee River near Savannah, raised cotton and lived to a ripe old age. Pending further research, evidence linking the two Braddocks is merely circumstantial, but men have gone to the gallows on flimsier evidence. Increasing interest by France and England in the Gulf Coast after Braddock prodded Spain to re-explore the region where the great 16th century conquistadores had marched off stage into oblivion.

Juan Baptista Franco's expedition of 1756 neglected the beaches. His interest was timber resources, especially tall, straight pines suitable for ships' masts.

However, Francisco Maria Celi's more extensive expedition which followed in April, 1757, put Tampa Bay as well as the beach islets and Boca Ciega Bay on Spanish maps.

Celi was looking for channels, shoals, and harbors, not resort sites; hence, his chart was hit-and-miss when it came to showing the Gulf Beaches. North of Cayo San Luis y Belasco (Mullet Key), Celi's map showed a string of shapeless blobs named Sevilla, Alarcon, Argumedo, Centein and Gandica. St. Petersburg Beach may have been Celi's Gandica, but it is almost impossible to match his blobs to existing islands. Because early map makers deplored empty spaces, fictitious islands often appear on old charts to fill voids, which confounds modern scholars.

Before hoisting sails for Havana after three weeks of exploring, Celi sketched a guesswork outline of Boca Ciega Bay, dubbed it "Estero de Romero," and took bearings on some keys near its mouth. He did not take soundings.

"I have tried to examine (Boca Ciega Bay) and survey it as being suitable only for fishing boats," he explained in his journal.

The expedition proved to be Spain's last big scene on the Florida

West Coast. In one of Europe's interminable power struggles, Spain sided with France in 1761 and declared war on England. As a result of this miscue, an English fleet was sent to ravage the West Indies, and Spain's great stronghold of Havana fell. At the Treaty of Paris in 1763, a humbled Spain swapped unpromising Florida to England in return for Cuba and believed that it got the better of the deal.

"A sandy desert," sputtered one London writer, denigrating Florida and the Treaty. Even so, curiosity about the Crown's new real estate brought several English ships to the vicinity of the beaches, among them *The Storm*, which anchored off Mullet Key in 1765 while George Gauld, a naval pilot, mapped Tampa Bay.

While Gauld was working his sextant and sounding line, the crew, at his urging, dug three shallow wells on the southeast end of Mullet Key to replenish the ship's water supply. Seafarers and fishermen used the wells for decades; cartographers noted the location as the "watering place" and as the *Aguada de los Toneles*—the "barrel wells"—because Gauld lined them with wooden casks.

Bernard Romans, charting Tampa Bay's approaches in 1769, was the first to report finding a white settlement on the keys. "On the Mullet Keys," he wrote in his journal, "are huts built by the Spaniards who resort here for the purpose of fishing."

Though Romans treated his discovery as news, itinerant fishermen had camped along the lower Gulf Coast since the turn of the century while salting and drying fish for the Cuban market.

"They arrive about the latter end of August," Romans said, "and continue coming and going until the end of March." He estimated 30 boats were involved, each making one or two voyages yearly.

Unlike Celi, who named every islet, shoal, and promontory after a saint, someone or something, Romans was parsimonious with names. Mullet Key (it was two islands then), St. Petersburg Beach and the islands between them were lumped together on his map as the "Mullet Keys." Of all early explorers to take a cartographical interest in the Gulf Beaches, Romans, deputy surveyor for the southern district of North America, was the first to sketch a recognizable outline. In his journal Romans remarked:

"The land is low and not visible until you are within about eight

miles from it where you will have six or six and a half fathoms of water; the chief growth on the (Mullet) keys are mangrove and blackwood bushes.”

The “fishermen from the Havannah” as Romans called them, almost caused a little war. Officials in St. Augustine, fearing dark intrigues might be brewing between fishermen and Indians to regain Florida for Spain, demanded that Major General James F. Grant, East Florida’s governor, (the Apalachicola River separated Florida’s east and west sections) evict Spanish squatters from the Mullet Keys and elsewhere along the coast. Being pragmatic, Grant realized he lacked manpower for a military adventure and wisely ignored the fishermen.

Britain’s prospects for developing Florida dimmed when unpleasantness at Lexington and Concord in the Massachusetts colony flamed into the American Revolution. Although Florida remained loyal, Britain had to return it to Spain at the peace negotiations table in 1783.

In November of that year, a handful of Cubans in isolated fish ranchos and a few scattered Indians saw the Comendador de Marsella, a two-masted lugger, sail north along the Gulf Beaches. Its commander was Jose Antonio de Evia, a 43-year-old graduate of the Royal Naval School, whose mission was to update obsolete charts.

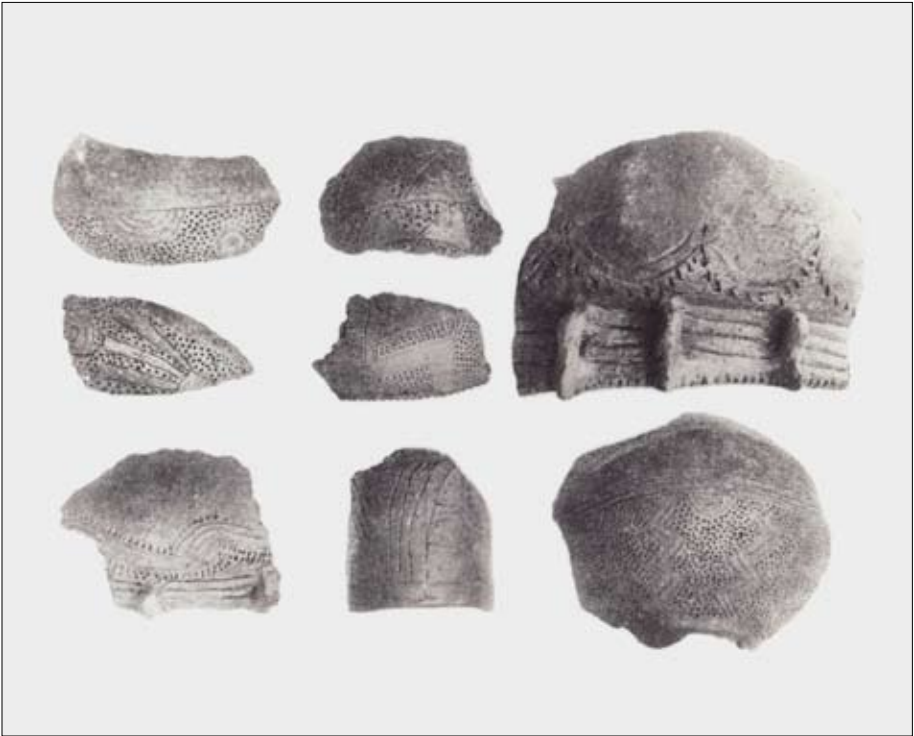
Except for a curious entry on his otherwise unremarkable map, Evia would be as forgotten today as that chart which now reposes in the dusty archives of Madrid’s Museo Naval.

Near the south end of an island resembling Long Key in shape and in distance from Egmont Key, Evia marked the location of the Rancho de Juakin—presumably a fish rancho.

(The 18th century definition of “rancho” was a “collection of huts.” “Juaquin” is a variation of “Joaquin,” a Spanish male given name; hence, “Joaquin’s huts.”) The rancho could have been one of those that became semi-permanent settlements during the Second Spanish Period of Florida history. Obviously Juakin’s rancho had some importance because Evia named only 11 other locations on his map.

If Rancho de Juakin was on Long Key in 1783 as the map evidence indicates, then Pass-a-Grille had a white settlement of sorts a century before the arrival of Zephaniah Phillips, the Gulf Beaches’

first recognized homesteader, and 54 years before Capt. William Bunce, usually thought of as the first white settler on the islands, built his fish rancho near Mullet Key.



Pottery shards (pieces of broken pottery) marked sites along Boca Ciega Bay's shoreline where Pre-Columbian Indians once dwelled. These ornate shards found in a burial mound on an island inside John's Pass may have been from ceremonial rather than utilitarian vessels. Because shellfish and fish were dietary staples, heaps of discarded shells called "kitchen midden" usually indicated habitation sites.

(Courtesy Heritage Village)

CHAPTER FOUR

THE “SELDOM VISITED” COAST

Being French, and consequently a romantic, George Lizotte regaled guests at his Bonhomie Hotel in Pass-a-Grille in the early days of the 1900's with the story of Iseka, the Mikasuki Indian girl who loved unwisely. Critics said unkindly that Iseka was a figment of Lizotte's imagination, and like that pioneer hotel man's famed fish chowder, concocted to titillate guests. Nevertheless, they loved the ingenuous story at the Bonhomie, and Iseka—though no one except Lizotte seems to have ever heard of her—became a Pass-a-Grille legend.

Iseka's lover (so Lizotte's story went) was a shipwrecked sailor living with the Mikasukis on Cabbage Key in the early 19th century when Florida still belonged to Spain.

One evening a fishing schooner anchored off Pass-a-Grille; by dawn, the ship was gone—and so was Iseka's lover.

Cabbage Key was only a temporary campground for the Indians. Soon they moved on, but Iseka stayed, waiting for her sailor to return to the palm thatched love nest they had shared.

Years passed. In the late 1840's, fishermen occasionally glimpsed her wraithlike form flitting through the thickets on Cabbage Key or on Long Key but never found a trace of her. Nothing, that is, except embers

of camp fires Iseka burned at night on the beach at Pass-a-Grille as a beacon for her sailor somewhere out there on the Gulf.

And then there were no more camp fires on the beach at night and no more glimpses of Iseka.

“Did Iseka’s lover come back for her?” Bonhomie guests asked, to which Lizotte would reply with a Gallic shrug. Translated, it meant “who knows?” If there was an Iseka, she would have had the beaches to herself most of the time. Except for Spanish fishermen in scattered fish ranchos, there was seldom anyone around for the first 60 years or so of the nineteenth century.

Spain’s contribution to Florida’s West Coast was limited to causing the Timucuan to disappear, thereby opening the area to white settlers. Diseases introduced by the Spaniards took a heavy toll. Those who survived were carried off by slavers or absorbed by Indians migrating into Florida from Georgia and Alabama in the early 1700’s after white settlers had pressured them out of their tribal lands. The newcomers called themselves “Seminoles”—literally “wild ones.”

Pirates lurked off today’s beaches. Smugglers and slavers with long coffles of blacks brought their illicit cargoes ashore where high-rise condominiums now stand.

In an acerbic report dated Jan, 2, 1826, Col. George Mercer Brooke complained that the coast was “seldom visited by vessels of war.” Troops at Cantonment Brooke (Tampa grew up around its log palisade) were obliged, he said, to “keep an eye to the coast as well as the interior.” Ships were “frequently wrecked” on the keys, and survivors cast up on one beach island died for lack of water and food. “The skeletons of several were found around what appeared to have been a fire,” he reported, adding:

“A vessel since we have been here, was stranded at the same place, and had it not been for us, all the goods would have been lost, and probably the passengers and crew, would have perished. Amongst the passengers was a lady.” Brooke sent at least two pirate hunting expeditions up Boca Ciega Bay. He led the first one himself in October, 1826, accompanied by his adjutant, Lt. George McCall, and 22 soldiers, including his cook and waiter. Even when pirate hunting, old time Army officers lived graciously.

McCall, later a distinguished major general in the Civil War, wrote home that the soldiers searched known pirates' haunts but found no pirates. There was a hint of disappointment in his letter.

Two years later, Capt. Jeremiah Yancey's expedition of 23 men, including McCall, sailed north from Mullet Key looking for buccaneers on the lower Gulf Beaches. This foray was no more successful than Colonel Brooke's.

In a letter to his brother in Philadelphia, McCall wrote, "We landed several times at points favorable to our search, but met with nothing indicating the presence now or heretofore of man." Despite loneliness and questionable, if not dangerous neighbors, fish ranchos on the keys did a good business.

Early in the English occupation of Florida (1763-1783), the ranchos became established bases for supplying dried and salted fish for the Havana market. During the Second Spanish Period (1783-1821), some camps became semipermanent.

Waters off the beaches teemed with fish, according to James Grant Forbes, who wrote in 1821 that the "low sandy islands and marshes covered with mangrove bushes" could supply the "greatest number of sea fowl and fish which it is possible to conceive—you may, at a particular season, load a ship with either, or with eggs, in a short time". The old Spanish well and campground in Pass-a-Grille that fishermen were using then should be to that community what Plymouth Rock is to New England. Unfortunately, it is not. For the well—according to an old description, walled with horse-conch shells—became brackish about 1908 or 1910, whereupon someone filled it in, and its location was soon forgotten.

Consensus among old-timers, including Capt. Kenneth B. Merry, who said his family often drew water from it, is that the well was located near 702 Pass-a-Grille Way. It deserved a better fate than to be forgotten.

Who dug the well? Anyone, including buccaneers, smugglers, spongers, or fishermen, could have scooped it out of the sand.

John A. Bethell rated the campground west of the well as one of the best, adding: "It seemed as if nature designed it just for such a purpose." The campground was described as "about 60 feet square in a

cluster of cabbage palms, three or four tiers deep.” Whether someone thinned out the palms or it was a natural opening, Bethell did not know, but he remembered it as a “lovely spot for camping.” Spanish fishermen began using the well and the campground in the forties, according to Bethell, but they were probably used as far back as the Second Spanish Period, perhaps even earlier. The Rancho de Juakin may have been both the campground and the well, together with a few thatched lean-to’s and some flakes (racks) for drying fish.

As an 1841 survey is supposed to have designated the pass on Long Key’s south tip as “Passe aux Grilleurs” (see Appendix), the area apparently was well established as a campground even then.

Capt. William Bunce, after whom Bunce’s Pass off Ft. DeSoto Park was named, was the first permanent 19th century white settler on the keys. In 1837, during the Second Seminole War, Bunce set up a fish rancho on a small, unnamed island on the north side of the pass just in from the Gulf. The island is now part of Ft. DeSoto Park.

Records from Florida’s territorial days describe Bunce’s settlement as consisting of “dwellings, stores and boat houses. . . in all, 40 buildings.” An Army officer, who did not mince words, called them “sheds.” Between October and April, salt mullet and roe sold in Havana and in Key West for three to four dollars per quintal (101.43 pounds). Bunce netted \$5,000 or \$6,000 annually from his rancho—a tidy sum at that time.

His credentials were impeccable. Bunce had been a Baltimore sea captain, a Key West merchant, and then a customs inspector. Hillsborough County elected him as delegate to the St. Joseph’s Constitutional Convention and on Jan. 11, 1839, he was a signer of Florida’s first constitution. An officer at Ft. Brooke praised him as “one of the most intelligent men on the coast” and “highly respectable.” Yet others said Bunce ran an erratic course. It was whispered that he exercised a sinister influence over the Seminoles, counseling them to resist the Army’s efforts to remove them to western reservations.

In October of 1840 a detail from Ft. Brooke led by Capt. S.B. Plummer burned Bunce’s rancho and destroyed the gardens that his workers tilled.

Gen. Walker K. Armistead, Army commander in Florida, later admitted ordering the raid because the fish rancho was a “hiding place

for a party of renegade Spaniards, who had previously and at this time intercourse with the savage band (of Seminoles) my troops had to contend against.” Seven years later, Congress had misgivings about the affair and appropriated \$1,000 to compensate Bunce’s heirs.

Captain Plummer’s pyrotechnics display was the only violent interlude of the Second Seminole War that occurred near the beaches. Small Army garrisons on Mullet Key and on Egmont Key reported only one casualty—Pvt. J.M. Waalfin, U.S. Marines. Official records state Waalfin died “of disease” on Mullet Key Aug. 22, 1837.

The first permanent settlement on the keys since the Spanish days was a polyglot melange of perhaps 150 men, women and children, runaway slaves, Spanish Indians, half breeds, and Cubans. Eighty years passed before the population of any settlement on any of the keys topped Captain Bunce’s rancho. Pass-a-Grille finally did it in 1920. When the U.S. Census counted noses that year, Pass-a-Grille’s population was officially recorded as 159.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE GREAT GALE

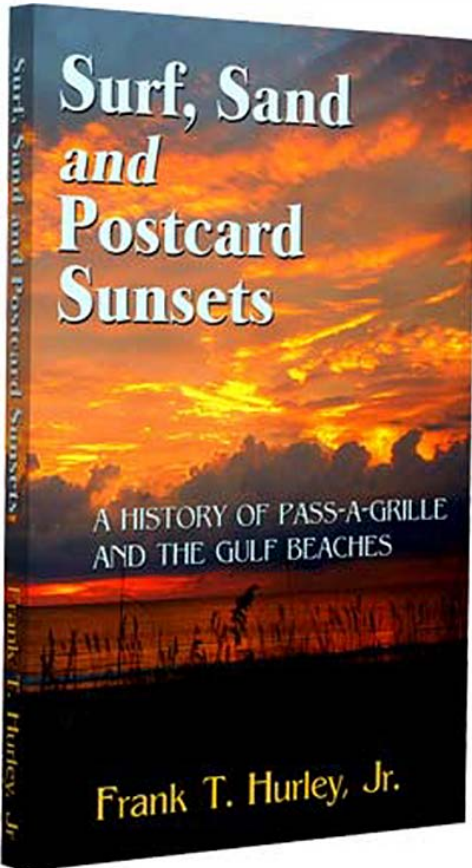
Old-timers called it the “Great Gale of ‘48.” Those who went through it spoke about it afterwards in the same awed tones Noah must have used when he told his great grandchildren about the flood and the ark. Anyone who had not gone through the Great Gale could not know what it was like. It was a kind of freemasonry that the old-timers shared.

Even modern meteorologists concede that the hurricane of Sept. 25, 1848, was the most devastating in Florida’s recorded history. Yet it had neither unusually high winds nor a low barometer reading.

Winds reached 72 miles per hour, barely hurricane strength. The barometer sank to 28.18. The tide, however, rose and fell nearly 15 feet in six to eight hours, and that did the damage.

Sweeping in from the southwest, the hurricane ran parallel to the beaches with its eye slightly off shore, pushing a surge of water from the Gulf into bays, passes and inlets. Then, with the passage of the eye, the wind reversed, came back howling from the northwest, bringing in more water. Gulf waters averaged 14.3 feet above normal (mean low tide), flooding the beaches, most of present day St. Petersburg and Tampa, and all the keys from Sanibel to Bayport 30 miles north of Tarpon Springs.

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