New Port Richey: Myth and History of a City Built on Enchantment

Adam J. Carozza

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New Port Richey: Myth and History of a City Built on Enchantment

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Liberal Arts
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New Port Richey: Myth and History of a City Built on Enchantment

Adam J. Carozza

ABSTRACT

This thesis aims to discover, understand and appreciate the history of New Port Richey. New Port Richey’s growth was affected by many of the same social changes taking place all over Florida, most notably the coming of the railroad, the popularity of the automobile, and the land boom of the 1920s. Post-World War II prosperity, pest control, air conditioning, and interstate highways attracted people to this city nicknamed the “Gateway to Tropical Florida.” Unique to this area was the Legend of Chasco, an invented tradition to draw tourists and new residents to the area, and the beautiful Pithlachascotee River meandering through the heart of town as it makes its way to the Gulf of Mexico. New Port Richey hoped to become the “Hollywood of the South.”

What remains distinctive about New Port Richey today? What are its special features and characteristics that separate it from hundreds of other locales in the Tampa Bay metropolis?

My methodology is simple; I will analyze and evaluate information gathered from available primary and secondary sources: Interviews, observations, newspapers, books, articles and government documents.
Chapter one analyzes the invented tradition of Chasco, which is a part of the history and heritage of this community. New Port Richey wished to cash in on the land boom of the 1920s. Having little history of its own, the invented tradition of Chasco was born, first celebrated in 1922; it is still celebrated today.

Chapters two and three chronicle the history, as well as the tales of New Port Richey, from its first inhabitants and pioneer settlers to present-day New Port Richey.

Chapter four introduces the land known as the Starkey Wilderness Park and Preserve, a supplier of West Pasco’s freshwater supply, which lies just east of the city. Starkey donated several thousand acres to the Southwest Florida Water Management District for his dream of permanently protecting the land and its resources for future generations.

Uncontrolled growth and development has eliminated evidence of New Port Richey being the “Gateway to Tropical Florida.” Land and water conservation needs to be a top priority. New Port Richey, no longer has that “special something.”
Introduction

When even the memory of this people [ the Calusa ] is forgotten, the Great Spirit will give this land to another – a strange but noble people made up of every tongue yet speaking the same language from the East and West, from the North and the South they shall come, and they shall possess the land on the banks of this river of beauty and enchantment, and they shall dwell here in numbers greater than the number of the palm leaves that rustle in the evening breezes, the river a winding length even from the Trident Palm to the broken altar of Toya by the sea. And they shall remain here always in peace and happiness.¹

In 1883, Aaron McLaughlin Richey migrated from St. Joseph, Missouri, to visit an old friend who lived in Brooksville, Florida. That friend, James Washington Clark, was also one of the early pioneers of Hickory Hammock, about forty miles southwest of Brooksville, now known as New Port Richey. He owned land near the Pithlachascotee River, where he had lived before moving to Brooksville. The two friends decided to travel to this Gulf Coast settlement, where fishing was excellent and game plentiful. Upon arriving and setting up camp on the Clark holdings, Mr. Richey decided this was the place for him. He thought that the sunshine and warm climate would be just the thing for his ailing wife and an ideal spot to rear his children. Richey negotiated with a man by the name of Felix Sowers, who had an orange grove and some cleared land, to buy the point of land at the mouth of the river. It was here that he established his home, in a small weather-beaten house overlooking the Gulf of Mexico. Richey soon found that the fastest and perhaps the only method of transportation to ports along the Gulf was by water.

¹ Gerben M. DeVries, Chasco, Queen of the Calusas (New Port Richey: New Port Richey Press, 1922), 12; poem from the legend, signed by fictitious Calusa warrior chief.
With an eye to commerce and transportation, he soon had a schooner built in Cedar Key. When the schooner was delivered, Richey found it necessary to have it registered, giving it the name of its homeport. There being no specific name for the place where it would be moored, he simply called it Port Richey, a name that would remain for one of the most beautiful places on the coast. This was the beginning of not only Port Richey, but the newer and larger city of New Port Richey, which was settled shortly after. Later, New Port Richey would incorporate in 1924, one year before Port Richey.²

Before the American Civil War, orange groves and cattle ranches were abundant in Pasco County. Most of the cattle of this area were exported to Cuba until the Civil War, when they were needed to supply the Confederate Army. Pasco County also developed into a major citrus producing center. In addition, a nearby salt works at Salt Springs supplied the substance to the local residents, as well as the Confederate Army. It was a valuable commodity used to preserve meats before the advent of refrigeration.³

After the turn of the twentieth century, New Port Richey was a planned community designed for people of means. The city planners attempted to attract tourists with the hope of turning them into residents. Hotels were built and advertisements were posted as far north as New York. Fishing was one of the main attractions in the area. In time, golf courses and theaters would also be built. Banks, drug stores, and various shops opened along Main Street and the Boulevard.

The annual Chasco Fiesta remains one of the largest attractions to lure people to downtown New Port Richey. Started as a small event in 1922, it has now become a huge fund-raiser for many philanthropic causes. The festivities were derived from a myth about a Spanish boy and girl captured by the Calusa Indians. After acceptance into the tribe, they were later wed as Queen Chasco and King Pithla.

Legend has it that on New Year’s Day in 1922, Gerben DeVries, New Port Richey’s first postmaster, discovered a parchment in an old clay cylinder found on the banks of the Pithlachascotee River. The text, in old Castilian Spanish, was written by a priest named Padre Luis. Mr. DeVries later wrote a narrative based on that parchment’s message entitled *Chasco, Queen of the Calusas*, which is widely recognized as the basis of the legend of Chasco.⁴

In the 1920s and 1930s, New Port Richey was considered a boom town in a boom state. Some notable people in the early days of theater came to New Port Richey and bought land. Jasmine Point, an exclusive subdivision of homes, was built in 1924. The Palms Theater, designed to show silent movies, opened in 1921, and the Meighan Theater was built on the Boulevard at Nebraska Avenue in 1925. The theater was named for the “Silent Screen” star Thomas Meighan. In the spring of 1930, Thomas Meighan was present at the theater to push the button that would bring sound to the screen for local residents with the coming of the “talkies.” New Port Richey was slated to become a new movie production center. However, it never reached fruition.

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The country’s economy slowed after the stock market crash, and growth capital was hard to accumulate. The untimely death of Thomas Meighan in 1936 finally brought an end to the fabulous dream of so many, and the “Hollywood of the South” was not to be.⁵

New Port Richey, Florida, like many cities between Jacksonville and Tampa, can thank Henry Plant’s 1885 railroad for much of the phenomenal growth of the region. Thirty-five miles northwest of Tampa, in West Pasco County, New Port Richey eventually hosted its own railway connection right through downtown. City planners constructed the community in a grid, naming north-south streets after presidents and east-west streets after states. The arrival of the U.S. Post Office in 1915 confirmed this city’s importance and put New Port Richey on the map. In 1924, New Port Richey incorporated, one year before Port Richey. Hotels, banks, and businesses sprang up in the downtown area to serve those who came in search of a better life. Fishing on the Pithlachascotee River and in the Gulf of Mexico attracted many visitors, as did the construction of golf courses. Businessmen, both then and now, have been able to recognize the importance of an area that caught the attention and the hearts of people from all states north of Florida. In 1926, the *St. Petersburg Times* described New Port Richey as “the most noted little town in all Florida.”⁶

Many people trekked to New Port Richey and the West Pasco area from parts north for various reasons, including their health and the warmth of the sun. It was promoted as a place for fishing, hunting, golfing, leisure, and retirement. Early advertisements claimed it was a place with an abundance of fish, oysters, and game.

⁶ *St. Petersburg Times*, 10 April 1926.
It was a place boasting good neighbors, schools, churches, and a wholesome moral atmosphere. New Port Richey also provided its citizens with the freedom, comfort, and pleasures of a small town within easy access of big cities and fashionable resorts – a claim still made today. In New Port Richey’s early beginnings, concentrations of people sharing a similar lifestyle formed an enclave. There is a strong tie between that lifestyle and the geographic space these residents occupy. New Port Richey is recognized as the “Gateway to Tropical Florida,” and with the stunning Pithlachascotee River winding its way through town on its journey to the Gulf of Mexico, it has remained the place for people to settle.⁷

Chapter 1
The Legend of Chasco

“As I gaze upon the sea! All the old romantic legends, all my dreams, come back to me.”
-Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

Folklore and Legend

Folklore and legend are firmly embedded in American culture. For generations these traditional customs, beliefs, tales, songs, and poems have been ingrained on the American imagination. The notion of invented tradition is myth created by the upper classes for their advantage.\(^8\) We learn at home and in school. Everyone has heard about the boyish George Washington cutting down an English cherry tree with his new hatchet and when questioned, he bravely answered, “I cannot tell a lie.”\(^9\) One of our favorite legends comes from a heroic poem by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow: “Listen, my children, and you shall hear – of the midnight ride of Paul Revere.”\(^10\) The most powerful historical myths commonly have a solid core of historical reality.\(^11\) A considerable amount of folklore has crept into the popular beliefs of modern Americans and is accepted as truth, representing the learning of our society.

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\(^8\) For more on the notion of invented tradition, see Eric Hobsbawn and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: University Press, 1983).


Based on fact or fiction these myths have become part of the history and heritage of the people who keep them alive, while preserving our past and enriching our future. How many parents would deny their young children the myth of a certain magical gift-bearer who seems to appear at the same time each year? As people mature and come to realize that Santa Claus is a myth, they accept it as such and then carry on the oral tradition of passing it down to the next generation. “We know that Santa is not real—yet it makes no difference.”

The Tampa Bay area is not without its share of folklore and legends. In 1904, Tampa’s social and civic leaders adopted a legendary pirate, José Gaspar, “Last of the Buccaneers” as patron rogue of their city-wide annual celebration known as Gasparilla. “The pirate Gaspar is an advertiser’s folk hero for Florida folk.” Members of the local business elite, disguised as pirates, arrive on a galleon, and take the city to sack it.

Legend has it that the pirate José Gaspar terrorized the coastal waters of West Florida during the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Gaspar, given to calling himself "Gasparilla," supposedly served as a lieutenant in the Royal Spanish Navy for five years until 1783 when, upon seizing command of a Spanish sloop-of-war, he with his fellow mutineers set sail for the Florida straits. And so the young Spanish aristocrat-turned-pirate began an adventurous life as outlaw of the sea. Gaspar’s history is hopelessly mixed with lore. Behind the festival lies a recurring debate about the historical authenticity of the pirate José Gaspar.¹⁴

Figure 2. First Chasco Fiesta on Main Street, March 1922. Photo courtesy of the West Pasco Historical Society.

Not to be out done, the founding families of New Port Richey wanted to cash in on the boom. Being a fairly new city with little history of its own, the invented tradition of Chasco was born. In 1922, postmaster Gerben M. DeVries self-published Chasco, Queen of the Calusas, the basis for the annual Chasco Fiesta, celebrated each year in New Port Richey (Pasco County, Florida).

The Fiesta honors the romantic legend intertwining the lives of a Spanish boy and girl, a priest and the Calusa Indian tribe who captured them after defeating a Spanish expedition. However, this legend is pure fiction and not based on any historic details; disquieting is the fact that many people believe the legend surrounding this event. Napoleon Bonaparte once asked, “What is history, but a fable agreed upon.” Even though the legend of Chasco lacks historical reality, other than the fact that the Spaniards and Calusas did at one time inhabit certain parts of Florida, the fiesta has played an important role in bringing new life to New Port Richey. Myths provide many communities, such as New Port Richey, a sense of identity. Eric Hobsbawn describes this type of invented tradition as having a distinctive function “establishing or symbolizing social cohesion and collective identities.” The local legend of Chasco has become just that, a part of New Port Richey’s identity. “Chasco Fiesta is true coming-together of our community,” said Cami Austin, the festival’s chairperson (2004). “It’s something that Pasco County is very proud of.”

1920s Florida

The annual Gasparilla (Tampa), DeSoto (Bradenton), and Chasco (New Port Richey) celebrations attracted an abundant supply of tourists to the Tampa Bay area. Local businesses had high expectations that some tourists would become permanent residents.

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15 For more on the known natives of the Tampa Bay area, see Charles Arnade, “The Tampa Bay Area from the Aborigines to the Spanish,” *Tampa Bay History* vol.1 n.1 (Spring/Summer, 1979):5-16.
16 Hobsbawn and Ranger, 9.
In the 1920s Florida was the focus of one of the greatest booms in American history as hundreds of thousands of Americans poured into the Sunshine State and forever changed the global image of Florida. By 1925, 2.5 million tourists visited Florida. Two important elements played roles in the Florida land boom. For the first time, Americans had the time, money, and means to travel to Florida to invest in real estate. For the educated and skilled working American, the 1920s meant paid vacations, pensions, and fringe benefits unheard of during the Victorian Era. The United States also had embraced the automobile: that indispensable family transportation that allowed you to travel to Florida; made easier by a state-constructed and maintained highway system started in 1915. Spreading the word about the Tampa Bay area, WDAE, in Tampa, went on the air in 1922 as Florida’s first commercial radio station.18

New Port Richey’s “Piece of the Pie”

In order to better promote New Port Richey, to help build up a winter tourist business, and to welcome with newcomers, a board of trade was organized during the winter of 1915-1916. Gerben M. DeVries was named secretary and the board was instrumental in bringing favorable attention to New Port Richey. From the beginning, New Port Richey wanted its “piece of the pie” for that reason; numerous advertisements were placed in newspapers, some as far north as New York, highlighting the town’s assets.

In 1920, the *New Port Richey Press* reported: “A river teaming with fish, and unparalleled for its tropical grandeur; Woodland scenery of rare excellence; Sunsets over the Gulf of Mexico which artists dream of but fail to depict; A salubrious climate, with invigorating breezes to temper the heat of summer; A delightful perfume pervading and impregnating the air; A community of home-loving people, contented and hospitable.”  

**Discovery**

*Chasco, Queen of the Calusas* was dedicated to the Avery Library and Historical Society of New Port Richey, 2 March 1922. DeVries claimed it to be a translation from an original manuscript he discovered while fishing along the banks of the Pithlachascotee River (commonly known as the “Cotee” River), near the old Indian stone steps at the first palm grove on the west side above Enchantment Park (now called Sims Park), on New Year’s Day, 1922. According to DeVries, he noticed a peculiarly shaped object at the base of a palm tree which had been disturbed by a recent storm. A hurricane hit the Tampa Bay area 25 October 1921. The *New York Times* called it “the worst since 1897, the West Coast having heretofore been immune, largely from the tropical hurricanes.”

Freeing the object from roots and soil, DeVries found it to be a clay-glazed cylinder about fifteen inches long and four inches in diameter, shaped much like a glass testing tube or large necked bottle. The neck of the cylinder was sealed with a substance like hard resin. This cylinder contained parchments that were badly deteriorated, yet whole.

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20 “Tampa is Inundated by a Tropical Hurricane; Florida West Coast Swept; Freight Ship Sunk,” *The New York Times*, 26 October 1921, 1.
Covered with writing in old Castilian Spanish, the document was translated [names were anglicized] to show that it contained valuable information relating to the early history of the Pithlachascotee River and of a tribe of Calusa Indians who had migrated from farther south and made this section (now New Port Richey) their home, after having driven out the Timucuas. Even though these Indians, (Calusas) had a higher degree of civilization than the aborigines and a remarkable civil and moral code, they offered animal and human sacrifices to Toya (the Sun God) on a mound near the river’s mouth. 21

**Chasco Fiesta**

The idea of Chasco Fiesta originated as a means of raising funds for the construction of a new and permanent home to be built on Main Street for the Avery Library; and with the intention of luring tourists to this West Pasco city. The proposal at once found favor. New Port Richey’s elite class was ready to back it. In a few days’ time it had emerged from its embryo stage to an achievement. It was to be a festival worthy of the ambitions of a progressive community and in line with all their highest aspirations. It was felt that Chasco Fiesta must be an annual event. It was predicted that Chasco Fiesta will grow as the town grows, and if both grow in the same ratio as New Port Richey has grown in past years they shall soon have a festival known the world over. However, due to economic and political reasons, this 1922 celebration proved short-lived until its revival in 1947.

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21 Gerben M. DeVries, *Chasco, Queen of the Calusas* (New Port Richey: New Port Richey Press, 1922); The supposed English translation of this fictional “Old Castilian Spanish” manuscript is being held at the University of South Florida Library Special Collections, Tampa.
In the years between 1923 and 1946, New Port Richey had smaller events such as water carnivals, dances, Fourth of July celebrations and a miniature one-day Chasco Fiesta in 1931.\textsuperscript{22}

**The Legend Begins**

In 1922, according to postmaster Gerben M. DeVries, the manuscript bears the signature of Padre Luis, who was a Franciscan missionary of the order of St. Francis, and was written probably two-hundred and fifty years ago.\textsuperscript{23} Padre Luis, writing near the end of his life, pictured a city that is to come, built upon the river. Using his Indian name Lakanokee, Padre Luis wrote:

\begin{quote}
Being now near the end of my days and the only surviving subject of our good Queen Chasco, I La-ka-no-kee, write this in my eighty-fifth year; that those who in future generations dwell where ebbs and flows this palm hidden river may know their wonderful inheritance and carry out the will of the Supreme Ruler; also that they might not fall into the grievous error of the Calusas, who were before them, in deeming the Divine Sacrifice of the Cross of no avail and persisting in the practice of animal and human sacrifice to Toya; neither to do as did so many of our companions who journeyed with us from Spain. They gave unto God lip service, but in the real Christian virtues they were lacking. Being deceitful, selfish and cruel most of them perished most wretchedly on the sacrificial altar of the Calusas.\textsuperscript{24}
\end{quote}

Among the soldiers that rebuilt Saint Augustine, was a nobleman who by his associates was called DeValla. He was a valiant soldier and set no man under him to so dangerous a task that he himself would not do – in fact, he preferred the more dangerous undertakings for himself.

\begin{flushright}
22 *New Port Richey Press*, 17 September 1920; *Evening Independent*, 6 September 1930, 6-a; 27 June 1931, 5; 22 June 1933, 2.
24 DeVries, 6.
\end{flushright}
When the work of rebuilding Saint Augustine was completed and the neighboring tribes who had not been converted were scattered he took ship for Spain and spent some years with his family at Madrid. As time went on he again became restless and desired to return to the “New World.” When his wife died, DeValla secured permission from the king of Spain to form an expedition and help subdue the unconverted Indians in “La Florida” so as to insure safety for colonization. Going to Barcelona, he gathered a following of men for this purpose. With him DeValla also brought his foster son, don Phillip, an orphan of his friend, and his own daughter, doña Isabella, their servants, and a priest of the order of St. Francis by the name of Luis, who was their spiritual advisor and tutor. Don Phillip was a youth of sixteen, and Devalla’s daughter, doña Isabella, only three years younger. The teller of the tale, Padre Luis, describes doña Isabella: “She was a rare flower, almost too exquisite and beautiful for the unknown wilderness—even though the wilderness was a land of unsurpassed beauty and pleasant surprises. Yet she was lithe and strong of body and well fitted her surroundings, matter not what they be.”

The expedition landed at Saint Augustine on Christmas Day, there they rested until spring. With a select following of three-hundred soldiers, together with DeValla, don Phillip and doña Isabella, Padre Luis, missionaries and attendants, they proceeded west until they came to the Welaka River. The expedition crossed the river on rafts made of large trees. Immediately they engaged in a battle with the Apalachees. The Indians were scattered after the great slaughter. DeValla spared but a few captives to carry the burdens - the rest he put to the sword. In the fighting fourteen of DeValla’s men were slain and eighty were so grievously wounded they were sent back to Saint Augustine.
The expedition then proceeded southward and came to an area where there were many lakes, and there they established camp. They would then travel westward in order to destroy a strong tribe of Calusas who lived by the sea. It was said that no Spaniard had ever been able to pass through the land of the Calusas by the sea. Also, it had been told how captives had been taken to a large sacrificial mound near the mouth of a palm bordered river and while yet alive their hearts were cut out and still beating placed upon an altar as an offering to the setting sun as it sank to rest in the sea. Ships could not enter from the west because of shell bars and every expedition that had attempted to enter by small boats or by foot from the Bay of Espíritu Santo (Tampa Bay) had been captured by the Indians. For the successful destruction of the Calusas the king of Spain had promised to give DeValla all the territory on the western coast from the waters of Espíritu Santo northward.

But it was not to be that DeValla would set foot on the western coast as a conqueror. He was taken captive and his was the first breast to be split open on the altar as an offering to the god Toya. A large force was sent eastward under the command of the chieftain Mucoshee to find DeValla’s remaining command. All of DeValla’s command was overpowered and captured by the Calusas including DeValla’s daughter doña Isabella and his foster son don Phillip. After being made to march westward several days they arrived at the western sea. Each day as the sun sank bleeding hearts were placed upon the altar until only three remained – Phillip, Isabella, and Padre Luis. Many years passed and still the three were spared. They began to realize that they were being considered as part of the tribe.
By his feats of strength, prowess and endurance, don Phillip found favor in the eyes of the young men. Doña Isabella by her grace, beauty, and sympathy, won the hearts of even the most relentless warriors; they likened her unto their river and because of this they called her “Chasco.” No further sacrifices had been made and in the fifth year of captivity, the Cross was planted over the altar on the old sacrificial mound. Padre Luis (now known as Lakonokee) had been teaching the way of the cross to the tribe.

Doña Isabella, was adopted as a daughter to the chieftain Mucoshee so she might reign over the tribe as their queen. Don Phillip was named Pithla. During the ceremonies a garland of flowers and leaves was placed on Chasco’s head and Mucoshee said, “Unto thee, my daughter Chasco, I give authority to have dominion over the entire people. Pithla, thy foster brother, shall be chief of the city, and into his care do I now give the badge of thy authority – an emblem of the trident palm.” Shortly after, his time having come, Mucoshee silently departed in his canoe and was seen no more.

At the gathering of warriors soon after chief Mucoshee had departed, it was deemed wise that the queen should choose one of the young men of the tribe as her chief. Ten days after Chasco was made queen, was the “Moon Dance,” which was the time of betrothment between the young men and maidens. As the moon rose the young men of the tribe went towards the lake and the queen with the maidens came out of the shadows of the palms. Twice around the lake in opposite directions they danced and the third time the young men met each maiden. The maidens would then place on the head of the man she chose a garland of flowers. Chasco advanced towards Pithla and placed on his brow a wreath of moon flowers. The following year, in accordance with the sacred rites, Padre Luis pronounced them as one.
The tribe lived in peace for forty years and in that time queen Chasco and chief Pithla had three sons. But, the young warriors were restless and wanted their people to return to the ways of their fathers and make sacrifices to “Toya.” Two French sailors were captured by the young warriors and they were determined to spill human blood as an offering to the sun. Even the three sons of Chasco and Pithla joined the other warriors and took the captives by canoe down the river. All the warriors were destroyed when a great storm brought the sea up over them. This great sorrow soon brought Chasco to the end of her days. Pithla mourned the loss of his queen and their three sons and soon after he died. Padre Luis was left alone to record this story for another people that would come to inhabit this land beside the river.

Something Borrowed, Something New

It appears that this [original] myth borrowed some historical details from the early Spanish explorers Pánfilo de Narváez, Hernando de Soto, and Juan Ponce de León. In the legend, DeValla was promised all territory on the western coast of “La Florida” from the waters of Espíritu Santo northward. Pánfilo de Narváez was promised these same lands by the king of Spain, Carlos V. Each had approximately 300 soldiers (count varies among historians) on their ill-fated expedition, and each battled the Apalachee Indians.25

In 1528, Timucua Indians captured Juan Ortiz and three other Spaniards who were searching for missing explorer Pánfilio de Narváez near Tampa Bay. Three of the Spaniards were killed but Ortiz survived.

He was captured by Hirrihugua, (Hirrigua) chief of the Uzita (Ucita) village. The Chasco legend mentions Hirrigua as the brother of chief Mucoshee. Ortiz was strung up over a fire to be roasted alive but the young maiden Ulele (Uleleh) pleaded with her father to spare his life, John Smith and Pocahontas?²⁶ The chief’s wife joined in the appeal and the chief relented. However, the chief again threatened to have Ortiz killed. Before his sentence could be carried out, Ulele helped Ortiz escape to the village of a neighboring chief, Mocoso. The Chasco legend uses the name Mucoshee as the chief who accepted doña Isabella, don Phillip, and Padre Luis into his tribe.

Furthermore, a hurricane did hit the Tampa Bay area 25 October 1921. However, the cylinder containing parchments unearthed by the storm was not seen by anyone except the postmaster who claimed possession. In addition, an Indian mound (Oelsner mound) does exist at the mouth of the Pithlachascotee River.²⁷

![Figure 3. Map showing the Tocobaga near the west-central part of Florida.](image)

²⁶ For more on comparison of Juan Ortiz and John Smith, see F. P. Fleming, “The Story of Juan Ortiz and Uleleh,” *Florida Historical Quarterly* vol.1 n.2 (July, 1908): 42-47.
²⁷ *New York Times*, 26 October 1921; *St. Petersburg Times*, 30 October 1921.
Tocobaga not Calusa

Although Gerben DeVries built the legend of Chasco around the Calusas instead of the nearby Tocobaga Indians, also serves to confuse, and in a sense add to the mystery of the events. When the Spanish first arrived, the Indians of this area were known as the Tocobaga. These were a confederacy of small Timucua sub-tribes ranging from the Tampa Bay region northward to the mouth of the Withlacoochee River. The Tocobaga were not, in fact, part of the Timucua culture which usually only extended as far south as modern day Ocala. However, at times some of the Tampa Bay groups [may] have been ruled by a Timucua chief named Urriparacoxi who temporarily extended his range of influence. The Tocobaga way of living is referred to by archaeologists as the “Safety Harbor Culture” (named after the location of their main town on Tampa Bay at Philippe Park). The Timucuas mentioned in the story were neighbors of the Tocobaga, inland and to the north, of this west-central Gulf Coast community.

The Calusas lived along the southwest coast of Florida, with Pineland Island in Charlotte Harbor as their capital. Most of the Calusas died within a short time after the Spanish landed but a few outposts lingered in the Florida Keys and near Miami until around 1763. Possibly a small tribe of Calusas or Timucuas may have settled at the mouth of the Pithlachascotee River near what is now known as New Port Richey?

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Although questionable, it can not be proved or disproved at this time. Unfortunately, most of the mounds (sacrificial or burial) were destroyed over the years, especially during the 1950s and 1960s, in the name of progress, for the building of subdivisions. Perhaps one day a Florida hurricane may possibly uncover buried artifacts along the Gulf of Mexico and shed light not myth about the ancient inhabitants of this area.²⁹

The shell mound at the mouth of the river mentioned in the story is located on the Oelsner property in Port Richey. It contains [no] burials but once had a temple on its flat top.

Figure 4. Oelsner Mound, 2002. Photo courtesy of the West Pasco Historical Society.

An historical marker placed on the Oelsner property states:

*This Indian mound is all that remains of a late Weeden Island period community, probably settled about A.D. 1000 and inhabited for several hundred years. Excavations conducted in 1879 by S.T. Walker for the Smithsonian Institution indicated this was a temple mound. A nearby burial mound, excavated in 1903 by Clarence B. Moore, was subsequently destroyed by developers along with other remnants of the prehistoric community. The mound was preserved by its owner, the late “Aunt” Martha Oelsner, (1886-1981) who believed that it also contains Timuqua [sic] or Calusa Indian graves.*

**First Annual Chasco Fiesta**

Based on *Chasco, Queen of the Calusas*, the first annual pageant and Chasco Fiesta took place at New Port Richey for three days starting 2 March 1922. After a most spirited contest over the election of a queen for the festival, Mrs. George Sims (wife of the man known as the “Father of New Port Richey”) was chosen. A grand carnival parade began at two o’clock, followed by carnival games. At five o’clock queen Chasco arrived by boat along the Pithlachascotee River at the Indian village in Enchantment Park, followed by her coronation as queen Chasco. The evening ended with a moonlight cabaret, comic opera, vaudeville songs and dances. Friday, 3 March, a decorated automobile parade traveled along Main Street, followed by fancy riding and equestrian stunts.

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30 William Pasco, Jr., *Pasco Tribune*, 27 February 1975; Historical marker placed by the Pasco Board of County Commissioners and the Historical Preservation Committee, 1983; Also, S.T. Walker’s Smithsonian report can be seen at the West Pasco Historical Society, New Port Richey; Sixty-two burials were found by Clarence B. Moore, see “County May Save Site of Indian Mound,” *St. Petersburg Times* 14 April 1989, 1.5; In 1903, Moore also excavated sites at Crystal River taking many of the artifacts away from Florida, see “Bringing History Home,” *St. Petersburg Times* 8 January 2005, 1E.
Later that evening dances were performed at the Indian village. Topping off the night was a fun revue and vaudeville act at the new Palms Theater, opened in 1921 for community events and moving picture shows. Saturday, 4 March, the second annual water carnival and decorated boat parade up the Pithlachascotee River took place. In its second year, the water carnival was combined with the Chasco Fiesta celebration. Later that afternoon thirty-six entries took part in the grand motor boat race for the Commodore’s Cup. In the evening a state banquet was held for queen Chasco and prince Pithla. Later that night a coronation ball was held. Midway attractions, high-wire walking, trapeze performances, and curio exhibitions took place all three days of the celebration. The event was so popular that when the president of the United States, Warren G. Harding came to Florida on vacation in St. Augustine, the *Elfers West Pasco Record* placed the article below the top story, “Queen Chasco’s moonlight ball.”

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A Dance in Fairyland

Queen Chasco’s Moonlight Ball of 1922 was a brilliant affair bringing two Tampa Bay legends together. She graciously received the “pirate” Gasparilla, who came to Enchantment Park in New Port Richey from his stronghold in Tampa to take part in the festivities. There are some interesting connections between Gasparilla and Chasco: prominent men played the role of Gasparilla’s pirates as they sailed into Tampa to take the city; just as they took Tampa, the Chasco queen arrived by boat to claim New Port Richey upon her arrival. Both events included dances, parades, and diversions that encouraged people to open their wallets and patronize the events. With excellent music by an orchestra from Tampa, dancing continued until a late hour. The New Port Richey Press labeled the function “A Dance in Fairyland.” Never has a more lovely scene been staged in New Port Richey, than that which Enchantment Park and the Pithlachascotee River presented on that night. “It was just an illustrated page taken out of the “Arabian Nights,” and it proved to what effective purpose the public grounds and waterway of New Port Richey can be put by the exercise of tasteful ideas and the application of determined effort.”32

32 “Queen Chasco’s Moonlight Ball a Brilliant Affair,” Elfers West Pasco Record, 16 March 1922, 1; “Queen Chasco Holds Court,” New Port Richey Press, 16 March 1922, 1.
Now that the lean years of the Depression were gone and World War II had ended, the time was right for the rebirth of Chasco. On 14 February 1947, thousands of local and visiting guests lined the banks of the meandering Pithlachascotee River, to witness a revival of the Chasco Fiesta, as merrily decorated boats and authentic replicas of Indian craft paraded up the river. The Junior Woman’s Club presented the Chasco Fiesta in much the same manner in which it was given in 1922. United States congressman from Florida, James Hardin Peterson (1894-1978), was one of the city’s distinguished guests for the Chasco Fiesta, having canceled a previous engagement to speak at the Ft. Myers Festival of Light, honoring the late Thomas A. Edison, to be present for New Port Richey’s outstanding affair of the year. Congressman Peterson expressed surprise at the scope and beauty of the pageant, the river display of decorated boats, and the fine and thorough manner in which the entire program was handled.
“It would do credit to a city many times the size of this,” the congressman declared in a brief address to the thousands who had assembled for the fiesta, “and I am sure that each year as the city grows, and it is growing rapidly, this fiesta will approach the greatest project in the state.” Mayor of New Port Richey, E.C. Brookman, declared a public holiday and urged all “to fittingly observe the importance of this occasion,” urging all business to suspend where possible, during the afternoon.33

**Centennial Celebration**

During Pasco County’s centennial celebration (1987) John Grey, president of F.I. Grey and son, the real estate company his grandfather started in 1924, recalled fond memories of growing up in New Port Richey to the *St. Petersburg Times*. “Chasco Fiesta was a really big event in my childhood days – everyone in town dressed as Indians for one long weekend a year. Sims Park was full of all types of homemade foods and games. The major events were the Indian Pageant, barbeque, and the Sunday boat parade. Most years there would be 150 to 200 decorated boats. They would come from Clearwater to Weeki Wachee to join the fun.”34

**Storm of the Century**

Since its revival in 1947, after a twenty-five year interruption, the Chasco Fiesta has been an annual event until a storm with no name canceled the celebration in 1993. In the early morning hours of 13 March 1993, the “storm of the century” hit Florida’s west coast with awesome fury.

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Hurricane-strength winds and a tidal surge as high as twelve feet in some places swamped houses, smashed cars, scooped up furniture, appliances and boats. According to the *St. Petersburg Times*, only Hurricanes Andrew and Hugo and a California fire inflicted more damage on the nation than this storm, which continued to wreak havoc as a record-breaking blizzard as it moved up the east coast of the United States.\(^{35}\)

**Chasco Fiasco**

Through the years, New Port Richey has been referred to as: the “Palm City,” “Wonder Town of the Florida West Coast,” “Hollywood of the South,” “Hollywood of the East,” and “Gateway to Tropical Florida.” In recent years, the American Indian Movement of Florida (AIM) refers to New Port Richey as “Racist.” AIM argues, the script used in the play performed at the Chasco Children’s Pageant, based on the story written by postmaster Gerben M. DeVries in 1922, is belittling and offensive. “We say at the price of our children's dignity and their opportunity for an equal place to stand in this society.” Beginning in 1995 Florida AIM State Executive Director Sheridan Murphy, State Information Director Mark Madrid, and State Field Director Jennifer Smith began attempting dialogue with the West Pasco Chamber of Commerce, organizer of the event, in an effort to address the "Chasco" events racist and stereotypical portrayal of Indigenous peoples.\(^{36}\)

\(^{35}\) *St. Petersburg Times* Storm Watch online website: [http://www2.sptimes.com/weather/sw.3.html](http://www2.sptimes.com/weather/sw.3.html).

\(^{36}\) *St. Petersburg Times* 3 March 1916; *West Pasco’s Heritage*, 1974, 55; Also, American Indian Movement of Florida website: [http://members.aol.com/_ht_a/aimfl/chasco.html](http://members.aol.com/_ht_a/aimfl/chasco.html).
According to AIM, in this pageant traditional Indigenous peoples and culture is depicted as “barbaric,” “heathen,” and “savage,” and falsely alleged to be based upon human sacrifice. The play involves the spiritual leader of the mythical band of Calusa's renouncing his barbaric ways to adopt the more enlightened ways of the Spanish invaders. This story has the Calusa adopt the two children of the invading soldiers to become their king and queen, because of their superior ways. “During the festival large numbers of non-Indians dress as Indians and act in a stereotypical manner based on their misperceptions of how Indians live and what Indian cultures are.” This pageant was performed for the last time at the 2002 Chasco Fiesta. AIM plans to continue their protests at future events directed at the Krewe of Chasco, an organization of local white citizens who portray Native Americans during the festival.37

The American Indian Movement plans to conduct a peaceful protest at the Chasco Fiesta street parade on March 21, 2009. The protest would mark the return of what had become a regular feature of Chasco Fiesta that has been absent the past few years. Ruby Beaulieu, executive director of American Indian Movement of Florida, views the Krewe of Chasco float as racially offensive because in her view Krewe members perpetuate negative stereotypes and caricatures of American Indians. According to Beaulieu, American Indian Movement, “hopes to educate the public” about stereotypes that denigrate American Indians.38

Chasco Fiesta Immortalized

_The Suncoast News_ reported that the Chasco Fiesta drew 250,000 visitors at the 1999 celebration, generating an economic impact of nineteen million dollars for the local community.\(^{39}\) Additionally, hundreds of thousands of dollars benefit local charities. In May 2000, memorabilia dating back to the original Chasco Fiesta in 1922 was immortalized in a Library of Congress collection in Washington, D.C. United States representative Karen Thurman nominated the venerable event in New Port Richey as part of the local legacies program in 2000, at the national library.\(^{40}\) In 2004, according to the Southeast Tourism Society, “Chasco Fiesta joins the top twenty events in the southeast.”\(^{41}\)

In 2004, at the 82\(^{nd}\) annual Chasco Fiesta, for the first time, “Noche Latina” (Latin American Night) was added to highlight the local Latino culture. Hispanics and Latinos, of any race, showed the largest percentage of population increase in New Port Richey. In 2000, (5.2 percent) of the population was Hispanic, up from (2 percent) a decade earlier.\(^{42}\)


\(^{40}\) Carl Orth, “Chasco Fiesta to be Immortalized at Library of Congress,” _Pasco Times_, 18 December 1999.


The Legend Continues

In February 2005, Tampa once again celebrated Gasparilla, a successful tradition since 1904, and in March 2005, their neighbor New Port Richey held Chasco Fiesta, a similar tradition since 1922. The discovery of this legend of Chasco coincided with the Florida land boom of the 1920s, growing competition for the tourist and “snowbird” dollar with larger cities (such as St. Petersburg and Tampa), and was enshrined by a person with less than objective motives.

In summary, these two celebrations offered excellent opportunities to draw and attract visitors and season residents to Tampa and New Port Richey. Gaining widespread acceptance, each event grows more elaborate each year. Fact or myth may [not] have been settled by some, but to those who take part in the annual eleven day celebration, the “Legend of Chasco” lives on.\(^{43}\)

Chapter 2

Early History of West Pasco

The earliest recorded memories of Pasco County pioneers have survived in written and oral records. Ralph Bellwood’s stories depicting the history of western Pasco County, covers more than a century, as told to, or experienced by, him. While many of the tales cannot be documented, for authenticity, a line given to Ralph Bellwood by Colonel McNeer of New Port Richey, captures the spirit of oral history: “I know not what the truth may be, but tell the tale as it was told to me.”44 One wishes many more stories had been preserved from an earlier time. The early pioneers of Florida and their way of life have vanished.

First inhabitants of West Pasco

When the Spanish first arrived, Native Americans known as the Tocobaga Indians lived in small villages at the northern tier of Tampa Bay. A confederacy of small tribes ranged from Charlotte Harbor to the mouth of the Withlacoochee River. European diseases and warfare almost annihilated these people, some archaeologists believe they were entirely decimated, those remaining joined with the Creek and Miccosukee who were being displaced by white settlers farther north. These remnants of groups and their diverse ways of living, melded together to become the present day Seminole.45

45 Interview with Terry Kline, New Port Richey, 2003. Mr. Cline is an authority on the Indians of Tampa Bay; for further research, see Jerald T. Milanich, Florida Indians and the Invasion from Europe
It is important to note that evidence of early inhabitants of the West Pasco area are being argued and could have been Tocobaga, or Timucuan.46

**Early History of Pasco County**

In 1830, Samuel H. Stevenson and his wife first settled in West Pasco. They named the area Seven Springs, located just south of today’s New Port Richey. West Pasco was at that time part of Alachua County, soon to be part of Hernando County. Created in 1843 and named for Spanish explorer Hernando de Soto, Hernando County was renamed Benton in 1844, in honor of Missouri Senator Thomas Hart Benton, who urged Congress to pass the Armed Occupation Act. The bill’s passing opened central west Florida to settlement. But, in 1850, it was reverted back to Hernando County due to Senator Benton’s strong anti-slavery stand. The first settlement in what would eventually become West Pasco was Hopeville, established around 1850. The first post office in West Pasco was in Hopeville. James W. Clark settled Hickory Hammock, on the Pithlachascotee River in 1872, where he raised cattle and citrus. He became postmaster in 1878. Aaron M. Richey later came to live there and established a post office. It was the custom to name the town after the person who established the post office; as a result, Port Richey was born. The settlement of Hickory Hammock became New Port Richey.47

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The Founding of New Port Richey

Before the Civil War, orange groves and cattle ranches thrived in West Pasco County. Most of the region’s cattle were exported to Cuba until the Civil War, when beef was needed by the Confederate Army. In addition, a nearby salt works supplied salt to the local residents and the Confederate Army. It was a valuable commodity used to preserve meats and fish in the days before refrigeration. Pasco County also became a major citrus producing center. New Port Richey, situated along side the Pithlachascotee River has a waterway leading out to the Gulf of Mexico. With all this it seemed like the perfect place for people to settle.


49 For more information on the citrus industry in Pasco County, see West Pasco’s Heritage compiled by West Pasco Historical Society, 1974.
Early Pioneers of Pasco County

In 1883, Colonel J. A. Hendley was elected county surveyor of Hernando County, which then comprised Hernando, Pasco, and Citrus counties. In 1885 he was elected a member of the convention that wrote the new Constitution of Florida. He was elected to the State Senate in 1896, but after serving four years retired to private life and lived in Dade City. Colonel Hendley recounted his record, “I do not own a ranch nor do I raise and sell fine stock which roam over large pasture lands, but I have been energetic and made great effort to build up Pasco County.” Hendley goes on to say in his book that Pasco County is the “Banner County” of the state in both fruit and vegetables. Hendley first considered Banner for the county’s new name before coming up with Pasco. He is credited with getting Pasco County separated from Hernando County by an act of the Florida legislature and named it after Senator Sam Pasco. Hendley insisted that Dade City was made the county seat and that it be designed with its wide streets and beautiful thoroughfares. Hendley also mentions that the “Negroes” of Dade City, having little money, were given a lot by him on which he helped build their first church. Hendley claims that all the high spots in his life were accomplished without one penny of cost to the county. When he traveled he paid his own expenses and received no payment for his work. In his later years as a Judge, Hendley uttered these significant words: “My message to you is to stand by your Constitution and the principles of the Democratic Party if our great State is to survive.”

In 1883, Captain Aaron McLaughlin Richey came from St. Joseph, Missouri, to visit an old friend that lived in Brooksville, Florida. The old friend was J. W. Clark, who owned land on the coast where he had lived before moving to Brooksville. The two old friends decided to go over to the coast where fishing was excellent and game plentiful. Upon arriving and setting up camp on the Clark holdings, Richey decided this was the place for him. He thought that the sunshine and warm climate would be just the thing for his ailing wife and an ideal spot to rear his children. Richey negotiated with a man by the name of Sowers, who had an orange grove and a cleared tract, to buy the point of land referred to at the mouth of the river. Here he established his home, in a small weather-beaten house overlooking the gulf. Richey soon found out that by far the best and fastest method of transportation to ports along the gulf was by water. So convinced, he had a schooner built at Cedar Key, with an eye to commerce as well as transportation. When the schooner was delivered it was necessary to have it registered, giving its homeport. There being no specific name for the place where it would be moored, he simply called it Port Richey, a name that would remain for one of the most beautiful places on the coast. This was the beginning and origin of not only Port Richey, but the newer and larger city of New Port Richey, which was established later.51

New Port Richey on the Map

In February 1883, the state of Florida sold to the Florida Land Improvement Company several hundred-thousand acres of land located mainly in what are now Pinellas and Pasco counties, at twenty-five cents per acre. Part of the city of St. Petersburg and almost all of the town of New Port Richey are located on these lands. In May of the same year, the Florida Land Improvement Company conveyed part of these lands, including the site of New Port Richey, to Anson P.K. Safford, former governor of the Arizona Territory. In this year, (1883) Aaron M. Richey, with his wife and daughter came from St. Joseph, Missouri, and settled near the mouth of the Pithlachascotee River at a place now known as Richey Point.  

In January 1885, Safford conveyed his lands to the Cooty Land and Improvement Company.53 In 1887, Pasco County was formed with the passing of House Bill #305. It was named after Confederate veteran, school master and political leader Samuel Pasco. However, there is no evidence of Samuel Pasco ever setting foot in the county named in his honor. The census of 1890 did not record New Port Richey; Pasco County had 4,249 inhabitants: 3,872 whites, 376 Negroes, and 1 Indian. New Port Richey incorporated in 1924, and Port Richey followed in 1925.54

In May 1897, the Cooty Land and Improvement Company sold the land to Sessions and Bullard, turpentine and timber operators. In 1905, Sessions and Bullard sold the land to Aripeka Saw Mills, a Georgia corporation.

Figure 10. Advertisement in Tampa Daily Times, 2 March 1912.

54 Information taken from the Pasco County Centennial Calendar. Available at the West Pasco Historical Society; Also, see Sixth Census of the State of Florida, 1935; For more information on Samuel Pasco, see Charles Arnade, “The Civil War Diary of Samuel Pasco” Tampa Bay History (Fall/Winter 1993), 72-75.
Aripeka Saw Mills began cutting the pine timber off the lands. Railroad trams ran in various directions, and a huge saw mill was built about five miles northeast of New Port Richey. A few years later, when the pine timber began to play out the huge mill was dismantled, the railroad trams were torn up, and one by one, the inhabitants drifted away to other mill towns. In 1912, the Aripeka Saw Mills ran an advertisement in the *Tampa Daily Times* offering the entire town of Fivay for sale but, there were no buyers; the town no longer exists.55

In 1911, the Aripeka Saw Mills sold a part of their lands to P.L. Weeks and in August of that year, P.L. Weeks, his brother J.S. Weeks, Jr., and W.E. Guilford formed the Port Richey Company for the purpose of colonizing and developing the lands. The actual beginning of the town of New Port Richey dates from this time.56

![Figure 11. Main Street, New Port Richey, looking east. This photo was originally published in the *New Port Richey Press*, 4 March 1927, with the caption: "As this street view from the Sims Building shows, New Port Richey's automobiles per capita is very high. The picture was made on Wednesday, when downtown traffic is not inflated."

55 Avery, 16; *Tampa Daily Times*, 2 March 1912.
56 Avery, 17.
**Turn of the Century**

New Port Richey at the turn of the twentieth century was a planned community for America’s middling classes. City planners aimed to attract tourists and then turn them into residents. Hotels were built and advertisements were posted as far north as New York. Fishing was one of the main attractions of the area. Developers built golf courses as well as theaters. Banks, drug stores, and various shops opened along Main Street.

In January 1915, P.L. Weeks sold his property to R.E. Filcher and George R. Sims. In the early part of 1916 George R. Sims acquired R.E. Filcher’s interest, becoming the sole owner of the Port Richey Company. New Port Richey, like many cities between Jacksonville and Tampa, can thank Henry B. Plant’s 1885 railroad for its phenomenal growth. Also, the arrival of the U.S. Post Office in 1915 confirmed this city’s importance and put New Port Richey on the map; Gerben M. DeVries, (1880-1953) was commissioned as postmaster. U.S. Highway 19 became one of the first paved roads along Florida’s west coast, making travel to New Port Richey easier. City planners constructed a grid of streets running north and south named after presidents, while streets running east and west were named after states. The city was incorporated in 1924. Since that date, the development of New Port Richey has been steady, substantial and rapid. Hotels, banks, and businesses sprang up in the downtown area to serve those who came in search of a better life. Local businesses tried to catch the attention of people from everywhere. Theaters were built as silent movies and plays became part of the identity and culture of New Port Richey. Fishing on the Cotee River or on the Gulf of Mexico attracted many people as well as the construction of golf courses.
Fishing on the Pithlachascotee River and in the Gulf of Mexico attracted countless visitors. Being difficult to pronounce, the river was commonly called the “Cootee” River, also spelled “Cootie” or “Cooty” in various local newspapers.\textsuperscript{57} Local citizens were outraged when Arthur Guy Empey, an American author who traveled to England and enlisted in the British Army before American involvement in World War I, wrote about his experiences in the trenches and used the phrase “cooties” (army lice), referring to a minute animal life that makes life unbearable for men in the trenches.\textsuperscript{58} The Tarpon Springs Leader stated, “Empey has associated this wonderful stream with the horrors of trench life. We don’t care a dang what you call it – but the name Cootee doesn’t quite come up to the scratch.”\textsuperscript{59} The name was changed to “Cotee” River sometime in the early 1920s.

\textsuperscript{57} The name “Cootie” referring to the river was used in \textit{The Tampa Daily Times}, 5 May 1916, 1.
In the 1920s New Port Richey was a classic Florida boom-town. A moving picture theater opened and movie and stage people started to arrive. Some notable people in the early days of theater came to New Port Richey and bought land. In 1924, an exclusive sub-division of homes was built at Jasmine Point.

In 1924, an advertisement placed in the *New Port Richey Press* by the Cotee Hardware Company ballyhooed, “I can’t help thinking that the Florida West Coast is much like the Garden of Eden.” In 1925, a New Port Richey booklet boasted, “Its scenic beauty surpasses anything I have seen in Florida. The natural palm groves through which meanders the Cotee River should be forever preserved.” The business community quickly recognized that this area had that “special something” to catch the attention and the hearts of people from all states north of Florida.

Common Lifestyle

Many people came to New Port Richey from the Northeast and Midwest for health and sun. Promoted as a place for fishing, hunting, golfing, leisure and retirement, early advertisements claimed it was a place bursting with an abundance of fish, oysters, and game, a place boasting schools, churches, and a wholesome moral atmosphere. Moreover, the freedom, comfort, and pleasures of a small town existed within easy access of big cities and fashionable resorts. That claim is still being made today. From New Port Richey’s early beginnings, concentrations of people sharing a similar lifestyle formed an enclave.

With Henry Plant’s established railway service in 1885 between Jacksonville and Tampa, growth came quickly to this area approximately 35 miles northwest of Tampa. U.S. Highway 19 was one of the first paved roads in Florida along the west coast, making travel easier to once remote outposts in Hernando and Pasco counties. City planners constructed a grid with streets running north and south named after presidents, while streets running east and west were named after states. Hotels, banks and businesses graced the downtown area. Theaters were also built as silent movies and plays became part of the identity and culture of New Port Richey. A railway connection passed through the center of town. The arrival of the U. S. Post office put New Port Richey on the map, reinforcing its identity. Fishing on the Cotee River or on the Gulf of Mexico attracted many people as well as the construction of golf courses. Specialized stores and institutions were built in New Port Richey to provide support for the residents’ distinctive life-style. The area around the city saw rapid growth and the businessmen knew they had something to catch the attention of people from everywhere.
Figure 14. Fishing, 1926. Courtesy of West Pasco Historical Society.

Figure 15. Main Street, 1924. Courtesy of West Pasco Historical Society.
From 1920 to 1925, population increased from 550 to 912, a sixty-six percent gain. This town seemed destined for greatness until the Florida Bust in 1926. However, in 1927, the *Dade City Banner* estimated the population of New Port Richey at 1275.61 These figures may have included the unincorporated areas or may have been hopeful speculation. Either way it was good publicity to show a town growing at the start of the Depression years. By 1930, population decreased seventeen percent. It would not be until 1940, when the population returned to its 1925 figures. Again, a large discrepancy exists in the population figures. In 1939, the *St. Petersburg Times* reported an estimated 2500 people while the Census of 1940, reported 920.62 Reality or propaganda?

Population lingered unchanged through World War II. The town slowly began to grow over the years but was no longer the same place. Tourists still came, but not the wealthy visitors and residents that once lived here. However, they did come for the same reasons that the earlier residents did. As the area grew most of the upper classes moved to the surrounding areas. Middle-class and working-class people settled New Port Richey, as upper-class people and businesses moved away from the city, downtown nearly looked like a ghost town.

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Table 1. Population 1920-1945.\(^{63}\)

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<td>1940</td>
<td>920</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1945</td>
<td>923</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In a letter to the *New Port Richey Press*, published on 12 January 1922, Mrs. J. O. T. Brown of Jacksonville, a daughter of Aaron Richey, described the eight years spent living in the area:

...the most lonesome years of my life, for sometimes it was three months at a time that mother and I did not see a woman. Mrs. Malcolm Hill was the other woman in that section and she lived some distance away. My father owned a schooner and was given the name of Captain Richey. He also owned the grove on the Dixie Highway, later owned by J. R. Ingram, and later still by Dignum & Rothera Co. The mail was carried on horseback from Brooksville to Anclote and then to Clearwater. There was no Tarpon Springs. Father got a post office established and gave it the name of Port Richey. He was the first postmaster and also had a small store on Richey Point. There was of course no town of New Port Richey but this locality was known as Hickory Hammock. Elfers was called Sapling Woods or The Neck. The first train came into Tarpon Springs in 1888. In 1891 my father moved to Tarpon Springs as he had serious heart trouble, and wished to be near a physician. He and my mother often drove out to Port Richey, crossing the Cotee River at Sand Hill, near the Tiederman property. Father always carried his gun and shot squirrel, quail or rabbits along the road which they cooked over their campfire on Richey Point. We think you have a fine little town here now and are glad to come back for a rest and vacation.\(^{64}\)


\(^{64}\) *New Port Richey Press*, 12 January 1922.
World War II

Shortly after World War II began, Mr. John S. Burks, information chairman for the Pasco County Defense Council, introduced his “Voice of Victory” column, published in the New Port Richey Press, Dade City Banner, and the Zephyrhills News. His plan was to keep in touch with the Pasco county men and women serving in the military and related services. All service personnel interested were sent a free paper of their home district. Newspapers were sent to New Guinea, Africa, England, the Aleutians and training camps in various states of the Union.65

Rank Weachter of New Port Richey, told of his experiences “Over There” to the New Port Richey Press. For more than a year with the American fighting forces overseas, he wrote home as his unit approached Rome, Italy. Weachter was one of a number of local military personnel remembered at Christmastime with a letter from Mr. and Mrs. Frank Parks. The letter was mailed late in November 1943, but was delayed and eventually caught up with the Pasco County soldier in Italy. A reply dated 14 January 1944 received by the New Port Richey Press follows.

Dear friends:

I received the nice long letter and Christmas card from you today. How nice it is to know the folks back home think of us and are kind in writing to us over here. Thanks a million.

We arrived here in Italy around the holidays and got a cool welcome; cold as it could be, and plenty of ice – most of the mountains were covered with snow, and this poor old Florida Cracker almost froze. It has warmed up now, though, today the sun was shining in all its splendor, and we are all about thawed out.

Right now, we are on the side of a sort of mountain – we call it ‘Ackack terrace,’ and the boys who are camped just below us call their area ‘Pom-pom circle.’ There is so much I could tell you, but right now, all that must wait for the duration.

Yesterday, I was in one of the larger cities here, and from what I was able to see of it, I like it better than anything I saw in Africa and liked Casablanca in French Morocco better than any other city there. We spent quite a lot of time there once, also in Oran and several other cities in different parts of North Africa.

I wonder how much we will get to see of Italy? It will take years to rebuild this country – the military destruction is terrible and complete. People here are friendly, though, and seem to be glad to have the Americans here. Bizerte is not much of a place but plenty of fighting went on around there. I have a swell souvenir from there, German, and will show it to you one of these days.

I see Charles Fowler often these days. He and I enlisted together. I had a nice long letter from home today. Mother seems to keep busy, and dad is no doubt fishing in the Cotee; guess he does a little hunting on the side. It sounds like the opening day of the hunting season all the time over here. Tell everyone ‘hello’ for me, and write again soon. I am o.k. and getting acquainted with some of the native Italians.

Local newspapers published bad news along with the good. War, and what it meant in terms of grief, pain and sudden death, was brought sharply to the consciousness of New Port Richey and Pasco County when the first war casualty from the community was announced in the New Port Richey Press. “The war has now been brought close to the heart of our community through receipt of the news that Chester McKay, son of Mr. and Mrs. J.W. McKay of our city, was lost in the Atlantic on 18 February 1942, while engaged in defense of his country.” Fellow crewmember, Roscoe Edenfield of Lacoochee, was also aboard the ill-fated U.S. Navy supply ship U.S.S. Pollux.

66 Reference is made to the Pithlachascotee River, which flows through New Port Richey.
68 “Local Boy is Listed as Lost in the Atlantic,” New Port Richey Press, 27 February 1942, 1.
Every club and organization did what they could for the war effort. The *New Port Richey Press* reported, “A most noteworthy event was the dinner given last week by the Finnish people in this vicinity. In view of the unhappy circumstance, this finds Finland fighting against an ally of America, these loyal citizens wished to make some demonstration of their allegiance to the United States.” Officials sponsored a dinner, the proceeds to be given to the American Red Cross War Fund. A grand total of $101.00 dollars was turned over to the Port Richey branch of the Red Cross.\(^69\)

The regular meeting of the Elfers P.T.A. on the evening of 23 February 1942 included a special feature of the social hour at 10 o’clock. Everyone in attendance gathered around the radio and listened to President Roosevelt’s fireside chat on progress of the war. The president said, “Those Americans who believed that we could live under the illusion of isolationism wanted the American eagle to imitate the tactics of the ostrich. Now, many of those same people, afraid that we may be sticking our necks out, want our national bird to be turned into a turtle. But we prefer to retain the eagle as it is -- flying high and striking hard.”\(^70\)

The Civilian Defense Council asked all men not subject to military service to volunteer for duty for the protection of municipal properties and facilities of the city of New Port Richey on 5 January 1942. The *New Port Richey Press* stated, “This phase of the national defense is important to the welfare and health of this community, and every available man is expected to do his part.

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\(^70\) Fireside chats of Franklin D. Roosevelt, see [http://www.fdrlibrary.marist.edu/firesi90.html](http://www.fdrlibrary.marist.edu/firesi90.html).
There is a job in Civilian Defense for every man and there should a man for every job – no one should shirk this responsibility and should show their patriotism by volunteering their services. 100 men are needed now!"  

After Pearl Harbor, every community took the steps necessary to alert their citizens. At nine o’clock on Friday night 2 January 1942, the New Port Richey fire alarm siren sounded three sharp, short blasts, followed by one long blast. It was part of a nine county air raid practice blackout. At nine-thirty, one long continuous siren blast signaled an all-clear. The Third Interceptor Command, headquartered in Tampa, covered nine counties of west-central Florida, had ordered the air raid practice and blackout. Citizens were required to put out the lights in their home, or place of business. If driving, they were expected to pull over and stop at the curb and put out their car lights.  

On 23 February 1942, the Woman’s Club of New Port Richey held a fashion show of the latest spring models at the Hacienda Hotel. All proceeds went to the Woman’s Club for national defense. On 16 March 1942, the club sponsored a food show in answer to the call of President Roosevelt: “Food is the front line of defense.” An official of Pasco County’s leading food distributor estimated that the 3,884 housewives in the county could feed 962 soldiers for a year with the food wasted annually. “Food is a munition of war and everyone must fight waste of it now,” said Harvey A. Baum, head of A&P Tea Company’s produce-buying operations.

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75 “Food Wasted in Homes of This County Would Supply Many Soldiers,” New Port Richey Press, 14 January 1944.
Chapter 3

After the War

Growth

Following World War II, the population of New Port Richey slowly began to increase as a result of the movement and migration of Americans who became more mobile during and after the war and thanks to the G.I. Bill, returning World War II veterans were provided loans to buy homes and start businesses. Thousands of military personnel who came to Florida for training during the war returned, and some chose New Port Richey as their destination for a better life. Within five years, a population of 923 grew to 1512 by 1950. Between 1950 and 1960, the population more than doubled to 3520. Figures released by the Florida Power Corporation revealed that the New Port Richey district registered the greatest growth percentage of any community in the thirty-one county section served by the corporation during the period December 31, 1955 to December 31, 1957. During this two-year span, residential customers in the New Port Richey area increased from 2174 to 2921, or over 34 percent, while commercial customers increased from 331 to 392, a gain of more than 18 percent. 76

Beginning in the late 1950s, the west coast of Florida began to attract large numbers of senior citizens. New Port Richey was advertised as a retirement center with inexpensive homes.

In 1955, new two-bedroom wood-frame homes in New Port Richey started at $3500 dollars.\textsuperscript{77} For an additional $2500 dollars, a person could buy a two bedroom masonry home with citrus trees on an oversized lot near the river.\textsuperscript{78}

According to the \textit{New Port Richey Press}, “Building here for last year [1955] in New Port Richey has reached an all-time high in value of permits issued and the number of homes constructed wasn’t even matched in the ‘boom days’ of the 20s.” A total of 198 building permits totaling $921,672 dollars, compared to $690,000 dollars at the height of the “boom” in 1926.\textsuperscript{79}

\textbf{Table 2. Comparison in dollar value of permits issued.}\textsuperscript{80}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Dollar value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1925</td>
<td>500,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>1926</em></td>
<td>690,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1949</td>
<td>253,675</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1950</td>
<td>330,395</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1951</td>
<td>336,065</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1952</td>
<td>581,670</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1953</td>
<td>632,930</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1954</td>
<td>544,989</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>1955</em></td>
<td>921,672</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The 1960s witnessed even more substantial growth as new subdivisions sprang-up. The price of homes did not increase much since the 1950s. A new, two-bedroom masonry home sold for $5,950 dollars, lot included.\textsuperscript{81} New Port Richey became the home of a high percentage of out-of-state retirees. By 1970, median age of the city’s resident’s stood at 62.2.\textsuperscript{82}

\textsuperscript{77} \textit{St. Petersburg Times}, 18 May 1955, 36.  
\textsuperscript{78} \textit{New Port Richey Press}, 19 January 1956, 4.  
\textsuperscript{80} “Building Here for Last Year Just Short $ Million,” \textit{New Port Richey Press}, 5 January 1956, 1.  
\textsuperscript{81} \textit{St. Petersburg Times}, 2 January 1961, 11.
Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, joining a club or organization seemed the popular thing to do among newly transplanted retirees. Some clubs were political such as the Democratic and Republican clubs. Many were social and cultural clubs that provided recreational and civic activities. Larger subdivisions created civic clubs for their residents. Numerous clubs formed for residents to preserve the heritage of their native states and countries. Members enjoyed dancing, bingo, entertainment and buffet suppers at the Polish American, German American, and Italian American clubs. There seemed to be an organization for just about every resident. For example, if you migrated from New York, Indiana, Illinois, Ohio, Pennsylvania or Michigan, there was a club waiting in New Port Richey.83

The 1960s was not just about retirees, a new $60,000 dollar youth center, a project of the Chasco Women’s Club, began and was partially financed by proceeds from the annual Chasco Fiesta. Youngsters age six through high school had a place to go, sponsored by the New Port Richey Recreation Department, for bowling, baseball, basketball, swimming and teen “get togethers.” Roller skating parties and teen dances with live music were also held at the center.84

84 St. Petersburg Times, 15 October 1963, 8-f.
Organized Crime

During the 1970s and 1980s, the New Port Richey area also attracted organized crime. Donnie Brasco is legend in southwest Pasco County. In the early 1980s, Brasco - in reality, undercover FBI agent Joe Pistone - and the King's Court bottle club brought Holiday, an area just south of the New Port Richey city limits on U.S. 19, into the public eye. More than 1,000 miles from New York City's Mulberry Street, Holiday, became the temporary home to members of the Bonanno crime family.

Pistone came here to forge an alliance with the Trafficante family of Tampa in hopes of partnering in an illegal gambling operation. Members of three of the five New York mafia families had come to Florida in the 1970s to take over the garbage industry and to try to set up a dog track in Pasco. According to the New York Times, Dominick "Sonny Black" Napolitano and Benjamin "Lefty" Ruggiero, both members of the Bonanno family, became co-owners of the club, along with Pistone and fellow agent Edgar Robb, who worked under the name Tony Rossi. They fronted the money for the loan-sharking and gambling operations run out of King's Court. Brasco arranged sit-downs between Napolitano and Santo Trafficante Jr.  

In August 1979, New Port Richey lawyer Richard Milbauer leased Robb the octagonal building that became King's Court. The social club blended inconspicuously with other businesses along U.S. 19. People driving up and down the highway would never have suspected the "extra benefits" it offered after hours. Anyone could join the private bottle club as long as they paid the membership fee.

People had to bring their own alcohol and pay the club for set-ups. The real action happened in the back room. In his book, Pistone said he paid Pasco County sheriff's Capt. Joseph Donahue to keep the police away from the club's crap tables, roulette wheels and blackjack games. "His job was to keep all the cops under his command off our backs while we operated our illegal gambling and drug distribution out of King's Court Club," he wrote. Nevertheless, during a "Las Vegas night" on Jan. 17, 1981, deputies raided King's Court, arresting Napolitano and three undercover FBI agents for running an illegal gambling operation.86

The club reopened for a short time, but the FBI closed down its operation in July 1981, having collected the "considered necessary" information. Pistone disappeared that same month, resurfacing the following year to testify in court. Of the 12 people indicted through the undercover operation by a federal grand jury in Tampa, only Trafficante and Donahue escaped conviction. The case against Trafficante, whom agents never managed to tape, was dismissed by a federal judge in 1986 for lack of evidence. He died the following year during heart surgery. Donahue, videotaped while taking payoffs was found shot to death in 1983, not long after his indictment. His death was ruled a suicide, as was Milbauer's death in 1981. Napolitano vanished after Pistone's identity was revealed. In August 1982, he turned up dead on Staten Island, with his hands chopped off - a sign that he'd violated mob security, according to Pistone's book.

Ruggiero was sentenced to 20 years in prison but died of cancer before finishing his term, Pistone said in an interview in 2006.  


As for King's Court, a developer bought the building in 1988, donated it to a church and moved it to its present location on Darlington Road, about a half mile east of U.S. 19. Today, the building serves as a chapel during the week for New Covenant Christian School and as New Covenant Family Church's Sunday sanctuary. Church leaders say the building is still the "King's Court," but a different king presides there now.

**Ancestry**

**Table 3. Population 1950-2000.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1950</td>
<td>1512</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td>3520</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>6098</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>11196</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>14044</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>16117</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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According to the U.S. Census 2000, based on a sample of 15,685 persons, (52 percent) of New Port Richey residents reported single ancestry, (28 percent) claimed multiple ancestry and (20 percent) were unclassified or not reported. German, Irish, English, Italian, Polish and French accounted for (69 percent) of the population. (12 percent) stated other ancestries and (9 percent) described themselves as American.90

Table 4. Ancestry 2000.91

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ancestry</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percent Total Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>German</td>
<td>2817</td>
<td>18.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irish</td>
<td>2637</td>
<td>16.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>2084</td>
<td>13.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italian</td>
<td>1764</td>
<td>11.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polish</td>
<td>853</td>
<td>5.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French</td>
<td>621</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swedish</td>
<td>274</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scottish</td>
<td>244</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scotch-Irish</td>
<td>204</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French Canadian</td>
<td>193</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dutch</td>
<td>188</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norwegian</td>
<td>167</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Welsh</td>
<td>151</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yugoslavian</td>
<td>164</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russian</td>
<td>134</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hungarian</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greek</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Czech</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West Indian</td>
<td>86</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portuguese</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>0.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ukrainian</td>
<td>70</td>
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<tr>
<td>Danish</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>0.4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Austrian</td>
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<td>0.3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Finnish</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>0.2</td>
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<td>African</td>
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<td>0.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* U.S. or American *</td>
<td>1433</td>
<td>9.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* Other *</td>
<td>1871</td>
<td>11.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

91 Ibid.
Table 5. Color Ancestry Pie Chart, 2000.92

In 1995, persons born in the Northeastern part of the United States (34 percent) comprised the largest group of transplants to New Port Richey. This city’s residents are in a constant state of flux, after five years, only about (48 percent) of person’s age five years and over lived in the same house in 2000. At this time about one in five Floridians were natives.

Table 6. Place of Birth in 1995.\(^{93}\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Place of Birth</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total population</td>
<td>15685</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Florida Born</td>
<td>3198</td>
<td>20.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northeast</td>
<td>5324</td>
<td>33.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Midwest</td>
<td>3693</td>
<td>23.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South</td>
<td>1554</td>
<td>9.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West</td>
<td>271</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Puerto Rico</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign Born</td>
<td>1454</td>
<td>9.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Born abroad of American parents</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7. Place of birth pie chart, 2000.\(^{94}\)


New Port Richey lacks racial diversity with a sizeable white population of (94.1 percent). Pasco County’s average is significant at (93.7 percent), while Florida’s average stands at (78.0 percent) and the United State’s average at (75.1 percent). Black or African Americans account for (1.0 percent) of New Port Richey’s population who are underrepresented compared to Pasco County with (2.1 percent), Florida (14.6 percent), and the United States with (12.3 percent) of the population. Hispanic or Latino of any race comprised (5.2 percent), Pasco at (5.7 percent), Florida at (16.7 percent), and the United States at (12.5 percent). Most of the white population consists of descendants from northern and southern Europe. The largest percentage of people are of German heritage (18 percent), followed by Irish (16.8 percent), English (13.3 percent), Italian (11.2 percent), Polish (5.4 percent), and French (4 percent). Most migrated from the northern United States with (9.3 percent) being foreign born compared to (7 percent) for Pasco County, (16.7 percent) for Florida, and (11.1 percent) for the United States.\footnote{U. S. Census Bureau, Census 2000, see \url{http://factfinder.census.gov}.}

New Port Richey attracted sizable numbers of retired persons over the age of 65 with (28.4 percent), compared to Pasco County with (26.8 percent), Florida with (17.6 percent), and the United States with (12.4 percent). Persons aged seventy-five to seventy-nine form one of the largest groups at (6.7 percent) of the population. New Port Richey also leads in percent of individuals below poverty levels (16.6 percent). According to the U. S. Census 2000, Pasco County showed (10.7 percent), Florida (12.5 percent), and (12.4 percent) for the United States.
With median housing values at ($61,300) for New Port Richey and ($119,600) for the United States, and median household income in 1999 dollars at ($25,881) compared to ($41,994) for the United States, evidence points to a large gap between the “haves” and “have-nots.”

Of the residents not classified as retirees, most must travel about 28 minutes to work. Agriculture (citrus and cattle), forestry, mining, fishing and hunting no longer exist in the New Port Richey vicinity. Of those who choose to travel, construction workers account for (13.6 percent) of New Port Richey’s working residents and educational, health and social services occupations account for (21.1 percent). Sales and service occupations, such as the mall, fast-food establishments and insurance companies constitute the largest work force (51.5 percent). No major industry exists in New Port Richey.

New Port Richey Today

Present day New Port Richey has an estimated population of 17,385, and population density at 3,854 people per square mile. Friday night football at the local high schools remains a main attraction for residents. Downtown is active and growing. Over 100,000 people live within a few miles of the New Port Richey city borders in communities such as Elfers, Holiday, Trinity and New Port Richey East. Many of the communities that sprang up on the periphery of the city in the unincorporated areas have New Port Richey mailing addresses.

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96 Ibid.
97 Ibid.
The city as well as the edge communities has much the same problems: traffic, pollution, transportation, water shortages, and depletion of environmental and natural resources. It will not be long before the urban sprawl of Tampa meets the urban sprawl of New Port Richey. Today, many of the older buildings and homes still stand but are in need of repair. New life is coming to New Port Richey with the city redevelopment department. Businesses along Main Street are eligible for façade grants to encourage improvement and beautification. Property owners also have a new grant program for painting and fixing their homes to increase pride of ownership. In addition, a residential redevelopment incentive program to reconstruct existing properties exists within the city that improves the value of the property. In the meantime, as the city redevelops, the surrounding areas of New Port Richey are expanding with the new sub-divisions getting larger and more expensive. Even larger gated communities are being built. The gap in the income level of the city residents and the new suburbs grows further apart.

One of the major problems facing New Port Richey today is water shortages. Plans for a desalination plant are in the works. Also, adult businesses as well as sign pollution along U.S. 19 and pedestrian safety on major roadways concern citizens. Land space for parks and recreation are disappearing.

**Community Improvement**

The future holds promise for New Port Richey. The approval for new neighborhood parks appeals to many residents. Each new subdivision with twenty-five lots or more will have to set aside at least one acre of green space. For developments of 100 homes or more, additional space must be set aside for parks.

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99 See census designated places such as, Elfers, Holiday, Trinity, and New Port Richey East, U.S. Census 2000, [http://factfinder.census.gov](http://factfinder.census.gov).
New Port Richey is no longer the playground of the wealthy. The average new residents are white, middle age, and middle class. The upper classes have fled to the gated communities behind gates on the outer rim of the city. But the city is striving to revitalize. They have implemented a modest public transportation service. These buses provide service from residential areas to major shopping plazas and the mall. Service is also provided for students traveling approximately eight miles from downtown to the community college just outside the city.\textsuperscript{100}

New parks are being built. Riverside Park, located downtown along the river, was completed in 2003. At a cost of $560,000 dollars the park has an observation deck, landscaping, and additional parking. No national chain stores exist in downtown New Port Richey, but all types of family-owned businesses are arriving downtown such as restaurants, gift shops and a farmer’s market. Residential and commercial redevelopment grants and incentives are available to residents.

Parades, fiestas, and concerts in the park are bringing back that old, small-town America spirit. Although the middle class replaced the upper class, the people of this community still share a similar lifestyle. They are here for the sun, recreation, golf, and retirement, but without the gates. U.S. Census figures showed (28 percent) of residents are over the age of sixty-five. However, the median age of (62.2) in 1970 dropped significantly to (44.2) in 2000.\textsuperscript{101}

\textsuperscript{100} For bus schedules visit website: http://portal.pascocountyfl.net/portal/server.pt/community/public_transportation/253/home/1820.
Water shortages threaten the community’s future. Important to note, water shortages are of grave concern to the entire Tampa Bay area. Gil Klein contends that the South is wasting water through unchecked urban growth, while environmentalists blame sprawl for worsening water shortages during droughts. In the Tampa Bay area, nearly 200,000 acres were developed between 1982 and 1997. That development, with roads, parking lots, driveways and roofs, blocks between 7.3 million and 17 million gallons of rain water a year from seeping into the aquifer. What affects the Tampa Bay area has an effect on New Port Richey and vice-versa. Decisions for the desalination plant won’t be made until sometime in the future. Filtering salt water into drinking water is an expensive venture. Disposal of the salt leftover from filtering creates additional problems. Lakes in the area are drying up as talks continue.

Recently, two hundred callers phoned the offices of the county commission about the controversial issue of adult entertainment establishments along U.S. Highway 19 in New Port Richey and surrounding communities. Community involvement is getting stronger and people are taking action to make this area a better place to live. This will be a long hard fight. Forcing clubs to move or restrict the wording on their signs will bring about lawsuits.

Another step in the right direction is the reduction of advertising signs along major roadways. Commissioners and site builders are currently battling it out. The area does not wish to lose the attraction of new shopping malls and other businesses. The businesses on the other hand want the biggest signs they can erect. The city and county are making compromises in the hopes of keeping some of the newer planned shopping centers. They have agreed to ground signs but not the signs that are held up by large towering poles.

Everyone’s favorite topic for improvement is traffic jams. The nationally infamous Highway U.S. 19 that runs through New Port Richey has severe traffic congestion. A task force for U.S. 19 will soon address issues affecting New Port Richey. The Pasco Metropolitan Planning Organization will target the U.S. 19 and Ridge Road intersection. Newer traffic signals and an overpass are some of the long-range options being mentioned. The organization has set this issue as a number one priority and wants short-range not long-range options. The greatest offenders of these traffic problems are the large shopping centers and the two new Wal-Mart super centers built as part of the urban sprawl that New Port Richey is experiencing. In 2006, a third Wal-Mart was proposed for the corner of S.R. 54 and Grand Boulevard.
Local residents of the Colonial Hills subdivision claimed that Wal-Mart would bring more than just traffic congestion to their neighborhood. Letters of complaint to the *St. Petersburg Times* listed crime, light and noise pollution as well as more bugs and mosquitoes due to water retention ponds. In addition, Wal-Mart would destroy the environment which includes endangered tortoises.104 Wal-Mart’s plan failed before the county commission in June 2007, because Wal-Mart and county officials incorrectly measured the distance between a proposed traffic signal on Grand Boulevard and the closest existing one on S.R. 54. They were short twenty feet.105

Large subdivisions built in these already congested areas add traffic onto roadways like U.S. 19. Environmentalist Jennifer Seney states, “The County has for decades not realized the ramifications of haphazard and unplanned growth.” The *Tampa Tribune* describes U.S. 19 as the “worst of what decades of a development ‘free-for-all’ can lead to: an unattractive and congested highway that is a danger to pedestrians.”106

**The Main Street Four-Step Process**

While maintaining the integrity of the Main Street approach, Greater New Port Richey Main Street, Inc. will venture outside the confines of the traditional downtown and reach out to the businesses and communities that support the overall goal to enhance and charm, continue revitalizing and improving economic development of New Port Richey as a whole.

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The nationwide trend of returning to downtown for shopping, entertainment and a host of other activities is alive and well in our city today. We see this trend continuing and look forward to your support in making New Port Richey the best it can be.

Organization: Work with the public and private sector community leaders to develop consensus and coordinate resources to revitalize downtown.

Promotion: Create and market a positive image of downtown through special events, retail sales, effective advertising and public relations campaigns.

Design: Encourage quality building rehabilitation, signage, public improvements and window displays to improve the appearance of downtown.

Economic Restructuring: Improve the economic base of downtown by strengthening existing businesses, recruiting new businesses, filling vacancies and maximizing second floor locations.\footnote{This information was obtained from Greater New Port Richey Main Street, available: \url{http://www.nprmainstreet.com}.}
Neighborhood Conversations

The first person I talked to in the neighborhood was a young lady about twenty-four years old who was born and raised in New Port Richey. She told me what many people have confessed before, that she has no idea of where the city boundaries are in New Port Richey. Traveling along the infamous U. S. Highway 19 through much of western Pasco County, it is difficult to figure out where one town ends and another begins. About 17,000 people live within the city boundaries but approximately 100,000 live in the Greater New Port Richey area making it the most congested area in Pasco County. She seemed surprised. When I asked her about communities and neighborhoods, she had no idea about what I meant. She said that “New Port Richey just [is]” and had no feelings of attachment to this geographic place. There was no pride in her voice talking about the place that she was born in.
My second conversation was with a retired couple of Italian descent. They have been residents of the area for about twenty-five years. Older people come to Florida by the millions; I thought that they would be excellent candidates to talk to. They were more interested in talking about their neighborhood in New York. I asked them why they had moved to this area of Florida. I got another “we wanted to leave the cold weather up-north.” Also, New Port Richey seemed just as good as any other place. Besides, some of their friends and relatives had already moved here. This is one of the few things shared today by people in this area, a community of retired folks looking for a warm climate. Italian Americans, make-up (11.2 percent) of New Port Richey’s population. This couple belongs to the Pasco Italian American Civic Club which is actually located in Hudson just north of New Port Richey, where they keep in touch with people of their own ethnicity and also enjoy some of the flavors of Italy at the club’s dining facility. Their biggest complaint about the area was not having enough smaller family type grocery businesses offering specialty items such as Sicilian salami like they had “up-north.”

The couple was concerned about the traffic congestion at the corner of U. S. Highway 19 and Ridge Road just north of the New Port Richey city limits where Wal-Mart is located. They are worried about getting too old to drive and they would have to get around this town without a car. Just like the young lady I talked with earlier, the couple had no idea where the city begins and ends.

108 This data has been compiled from multiple government and commercial sources, see http://www.city-data.com.
They did not think that New Port Richey qualified as a community, “it’s just a place to live.” The one thing that they did agree on was that New Port Richey is a place that has many like-minded retirees.

Some random casual surveys in the neighborhood revealed that three out of eight local residents (aged 41-55) agreed that there was a strong sense of community but did not care to elaborate on it. When asked if they had any desire to stay in this community, four of the eight said yes. One resident had a desire to leave and three did not care whether they stayed or not.\textsuperscript{110}

**Crime Statistics**

Population is not the only thing increasing, crime is on the rise. In 2006, the average crime index was (653.6) crimes per 100,000 inhabitants, more than double the United States average of (320.9). Theft in New Port Richey tops the list with (3,491.5) thefts per 100,000 compared to the U.S. average of (2206.8). Burglaries in New Port Richey account for (1893.9) per 100,000, and the U.S. average at (729.4). Rapes were well above the national average of (30.9) at (116.2) and the ratio of number of residents in New Port Richey to the number of sex offenders is an alarming 125 to one.\textsuperscript{111}

\textsuperscript{110} Random sampling of neighborhood by author, 11 January 2009.
\textsuperscript{111} New Port Richey, see \url{http://www.city-data.com}; also, see U.S. crime rates 1960-2007, \url{http://www.disastercenter.com/crime/uscrime.htm}. 68
### Table 8. Crime in New Port Richey and U.S. per 100,000 inhabitants, 2006.

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<tr>
<th>Type</th>
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<th>United States</th>
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<td>Robberies</td>
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### Table 9. Crime in New Port Richey by year.

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<tr>
<th>Type</th>
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<tr>
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<td>6.2</td>
<td>18.1</td>
<td>35.6</td>
<td>47.7</td>
<td>11.7</td>
<td>11.7</td>
<td>5.8</td>
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<td>552.6</td>
<td>560.6</td>
<td>545.3</td>
<td>586.9</td>
<td>515.1</td>
<td>653.6</td>
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</tbody>
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113 Ibid.
Chapter 4

Historical Evolution of the J.B. Starkey Wilderness Preserve

“... the fundamental principles of ecology govern our lives wherever we live, and ... we must wake up to this fact or be lost.”¹¹⁴

Early Inhabitants of the Land

The Native Indians that lived near today’s Starkey Wilderness Park were the Tocobaga (Safety Harbor Culture). They inhabited the Florida Gulf Coast from 900 A.D. through the early eighteenth century. Safety Harbor sites are found along the Gulf Coast from Charlotte Harbor north to the Withlacoochee River in Citrus County. Tocobaga arrowheads have been unearthed on the Starkey property. Approximately thirty-three prehistoric archaeological sites have been identified as temporary campsites for hunting within the Starkey Wilderness Park. By the eighteenth century, the remaining Tocobaga possibly joined the Creek Indians from farther north as they [Creek Indians] moved south seeking refuge from persecution by the new settlers. Some scholars believe that the Tocobaga may have perished into extinction.¹¹⁵

The first legal records pertaining to the ownership of the Starkey Wilderness Park date from 1856, when much of the property turned over to the Internal Improvement Board as swamped overflow land. In 1883, Hamilton Disston’s Florida Land and Improvement Company bought all of the Starkey Wilderness Park property except portions where settlers lived. In 1891, the Florida Land and Improvement Company sold the land to the Pasco Land Company. After the demise of the Pasco Land Company due to difficult financial times, Emily Lyon bought the property in 1895.\textsuperscript{116}

The land provided turpentine for extraction, wild game hunting, and the harvesting of Spanish moss. The area contains two historical remains of old turpentine camps. In 1910, Lyon Lumber Company received the land from Emily Lyon. The Lyon and Dowling Lumber Companies harvested cypress and pine from the land, shipping timbers from a narrow gauge railroad. In 1929, the land reverted to the State of Florida for unpaid taxes, before the Phoenix Tax Title Corporation paid the back taxes and acquired the property.\textsuperscript{117}

In 1937, Jay B. Starkey and Earnest, Dave, and Howard Cunningham bought approximately 16,000 acres for $1.40 per acre and assumption of back taxes. Both families used the ranch to raise cattle. Starkey often sold land to developers, as land values went up and cattle yields decreased. Jay B. Starkey, Sr. outlived his partners and sold the cattle and equipment to his son Jay B. Starkey, Jr. The senior Starkey worked the land with his son for cattle ranching, and even converted a smaller portion of land into an orange grove. Over the years, items such as timber, pine stumps, and resin were sold to provide extra income.

\textsuperscript{116} Lawson, “Preserving for the Future.”
\textsuperscript{117} Ibid.
In 1975, as the population increased in Pasco County, Starkey, Sr. decided to preserve the land from development by selling sections to the Southwest Florida Water Management District (SWFWMD).\textsuperscript{118}

**History of the land**

The year 1845 promised prosperity for Florida and the citizens of Benton County, named after U.S. Senator Thomas Hart Benton of Missouri. The vanquished Seminole Indians appeared to be under control, while new residents arrived in the area daily, under the Armed Occupation Act of 1842, and the territory gained statehood.\textsuperscript{119} Pioneers who fled the area during the Second Seminole War returned. Cattlemen became active, especially in the south end around the site of Starkey Wilderness Park. During certain periods of the year, usually the spring, pioneers corralled their cattle. The cattle cleared tracts of palmetto and scrub pine and fertilized the land. When planting season arrived, settlers released their stock to forage on their own. The settlers planted crops in the newly cleared and fertilized plots of land. Wolves predominated as the wildlife of the area in the 1840s and 1850s. Cattle herders poisoned many of them so that by 1880, the wolf was extinct in Florida. Bear, panther, wildcat, deer, wild turkey, duck and squirrel also existed in such large numbers that farmers felt it necessary to destroy them to protect their crops and stock.\textsuperscript{120}

\textsuperscript{118} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{120} J.A. Hendley, *History of Pasco County* (Dade City, Fl.: n.p, n.d.), 5; Jay Starkey, “*Things I Remember*” (Brooksville, Fl.: Southwest Florida Water Management District, 1980).
In 1847 and 1848, two surveyors from the state of Florida visited the site now known as Starkey Wilderness Park and labeled it Sections 1-12, Township 26S, Range 17E. George Watson, Deputy Surveyor, arrived on the property in January 1847, and spent two months surveying the twelve sections and the surrounding area. Watson described the land as open pine, palmetto and prairie country and rated small quantities of long leaf yellow pine suitable for lumber purposes.

Watson encountered saw grass, lakes, and cypress swamp, as well as an area where maple, bay, sweet gum, water oak and magnolia trees grew in abundance. Nineteen months later, John Jackson followed Watson and drew a map of the surveyed lands that looked almost identical to a present day map of the area. Jackson also identified the area’s potential for timber, though he classified the section as third-rate pineland.121

A few years after the survey, at least one family lived about two miles from the Starkey property. The James Stephenson family moved to an area on the Anclote River. Stephenson named this site, Seven Springs, after seven underwater springs he discovered in the Anclote River. Soon other families joined the Stephenson’s on the Anclote.122

In 1850, by an act of the United States Congress, states could receive swamp and overflowed lands for the purposes of drainage and reclamation. In 1851, the state General Assembly established the Internal Improvement Board for the management of this land and 500,000 acres of additional land given to Florida by the federal government when it entered the Union.

In 1855, the state established the Internal Improvement Fund through the Internal Improvement Act of 1855. The Internal Improvement Board supervised this fund and used state lands to develop internal improvements. Land not yet sold by the state could be sold and the revenue used for improvements for development of transportation routes.\textsuperscript{123}

On 9 August 1856, the United States donated to Florida under the 1850 Congressional Act concerning swamps and overflow land, a large parcel that included the area of the Starkey Wilderness Park and known as Sections 1-12, Township 26S, Range 17E. This patent, signed by President Franklin Pierce, came under control of the Internal Improvement Board. Most of this land remained unsold until the 1880s.\textsuperscript{124}

Buried within the palmettos, scrub pine and oaks of Starkey Wilderness Park lay the remains of a genuine nineteenth century Florida “cracker” homestead (Florida State Historical Site #PA1385). In 1882, James McNeill purchased 61 acres in section 6 from the Florida Internal Improvement Fund. Archaeological evidence indicates McNeill farmed this property and raised a family of three children. He and his wife Martha settled on this land led what was probably a typical frontier farmer’s life and sold it in 1905. The property has remnants of a log cabin, an old brick-lined well, animal pens, and an early twentieth century automobile.\textsuperscript{125}

\textsuperscript{124} Information gathered from the park’s Education Center at the Pioneer Florida Exhibit and Library.
\textsuperscript{125} Information on the McNeill Homestead available online at the historical marker database, http://www hmdb org/marker.asp?marker=4665.
More intriguing is the human grave surrounded by rocks on the property. Four highly trained dogs and their handlers of the K-9 Forensic Recovery Unit have confirmed its existence. Early stories refer to a 15-year-old girl, buried here, a victim of smallpox. However, the size of the plot indicates more than one individual may be interred at the site. The McNeill family could have settled here earlier or someone else came before them. Archaeological and research studies are continuing to unravel the story of the McNeill homestead.\footnote{Information gathered from the park’s Education Center at the Pioneer Florida exhibit and library; Robert T. Grange, Jr., and Raymond Williams, “Archaeological Survey of the J.B. Starkey Wilderness Park” (Pasco County, Fl., July 1981).}
Survey of the Land

The Starkey tract is located between the Pithlachascotee River on the north and the Anclote River on the south. A portion of the Pithlachascotee flows through the excluded northwest corner of section 6 while a small tributary of the Anclote flows north south through the western half of the tract in sections 2 and 11. The western portion of the tract includes several sinkhole ponds and lakes. The entire area lies within the Gulf coastal lowlands, a low-lying strip that parallels the Gulf of Mexico from the panhandle area of Florida to Charlotte Harbor.¹²⁷

The Anclote River is 27.5 miles long and the Pithlachascotee River is 41 miles long. These rivers drain an area of approximately 300 square miles. This area consists of depressions and sinkholes caused by cavities in the underlying limestone, particularly on the north side of the Pithlachascotee. The aquifer housed in the underlying limestone and dolomite is the main source of water for the Anclote and Pithlachascotee since many of the streams, and small tributaries, which feed the two rivers, are dry much of the year. The rainfall collected in the sinkholes replenishes the aquifer.¹²⁸

The Anclote River, approximately 65 feet above mean sea level at its source drops an average rate of 2.4 feet per mile as it meanders to the coast. The Pithlachascotee, 120 feet above mean sea level at its source drops an average of 2.9 feet.

The subtropical climate averages daytime highs in the summer around 90° F. and in the winter around 53° F. Most of the rain occurs in the summer months and the intense rain in the summer often causes flooding in low-lying areas.

Eleven biological communities have been delineated for the Starkey Wilderness Park west of the power line (Florida Power electrical transmission line) running northeast southeast through Sections 3, 4 and 9. East of the power line, contains mainly pine flatlands, cypress and turkey oak, live oak and pine communities. The eleven communities west of the power line: 129

- Pine flatwoods
- Turkey oak, live oak, pine
- Sand pine
- Pasture
- Bay
- Hammock
- Hardwood swamp
- Mesic hardwood
- Lakes and ponds
- Marsh
- Cypress

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Starkey Wilderness Preserve

The Starkey Wilderness Preserve is one of the largest undeveloped tracts in Pasco County (approximately 19,000 acres) and protects sensitive environmental areas in the fast growing western portion of Pasco County, east of New Port Richey.

The preserve is comprised of three tracts:

- J.B. Starkey Wilderness Park
- Serenova Tract
- Ancote River Tract (Starkey Ranch)

The preserve is the culmination of foresight and cooperative spirit of individuals and governmental agencies working to carry forth “one man’s dream.” Jay B. Starkey, Sr., purchased the land in 1937 and then developed a cattle ranch and timber operation. In 1975, Mr. Starkey donated several hundred acres to the Southwest Florida Water Management District (SWFWMD), initiating the concept of permanently protecting the land and its resources for future generations.\(^\text{130}\)

The J.B. Starkey Wilderness Park is a regional park owned by SWFWMD and managed by Pasco County that features a paved trail that connects to the 42-mile Suncoast Paved Trail, picnic shelters, hiking and equestrian trails, a primitive campground and camping cabins. The park has a bird watching trail and boasts 177 species of birds including the threatened Florida scrub jay. In addition, the park has planted shrubs and plants native to Florida such as the coontie (zamia pumila), an older name for this species (zamia Floridana).

\(^\text{130}\) Recreation Guide to Southwest Florida Water Management District Lands, (September 2005), Brooksville, Florida, online version: [http://www.swfwmd.state.fl.us](http://www.swfwmd.state.fl.us).
Florida's indigenous peoples and later European settlers processed the coontie's large storage root to extract an edible starch. For this reason, the coontie was often commonly called Seminole bread during the late 1800s.\textsuperscript{131}

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{fig19}
\caption{Jay B. Starkey Wilderness Park. Location of Tract.}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{131} For more on Florida plants and shrubs, visit \url{http://www.floridata.com}.

\begin{marginfigure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\marginwidth]{fig19}
\caption{Jay B. Starkey Wilderness Park. Courtesy of Southwest Florida Water Management District.}
\end{marginfigure}
The Serenova and Anclote River Ranch tracts managed by SWFWMD for passive nature-based outdoor recreation activities. These tracts have limited amenities and provide visitors a more rustic outdoor experience. The Serenova Tract, a favorite for horseback riding with trails that wind through all the major natural communities on the Preserve; primitive equestrian and backcountry camping is also available in the park.

The Anclote River Ranch Tract can be accessed from the hiking trails in J.B. Starkey Wilderness Park and provide visitors the opportunity to experience the natural beauty of the Preserve with little sign of human presence. No trails are marked on the Anclote River Ranch Tract, but visitors can hike on the unimproved trails.\(^\text{132}\)

**Serenova Tract**

*With the possible exception of light, nothing is so vital to the existence of life on earth as pure, liquid water.*\(^\text{133}\)

Managed by SWFWMD for nature-based recreational opportunities, Serenova’s prominent natural communities (6,533 acres) include pine flatwoods, cypress domes, freshwater marshes, stream and lake swamps, sandhill and scrub. Wetland communities in Serenova (2,300 acres) combine with the wetlands in Starkey Wilderness Park to form a connected 6,000-acre wetland ecosystem spread throughout approximately 19,000 acres of conservation lands. Due to the public acquisition of these lands, this large wetland system continues to function as an intact ecosystem.

\(^{132}\) Recreation guide online SWFWMD, 2005.

This vast network of scattered wetlands become interconnected during periods of high water levels and serve as vital life cycle linkages for many wetland-dependent species.\textsuperscript{134}

Like many SWFWMD properties, this tract serves as a natural buffer for one of the region’s primary freshwater resources, the Pithlachascotee (Cotee) River. The lands protect water quality by serving as a recharge area for a regional well field and act as a natural filter of surface water as it flows across the landscape into the Cotee River.

Another less visible benefit of these lands is the vital link they play in assuring that the Gulf of Mexico receives the clean fresh water needed to maintain the long-term health of the coastal estuaries. Without a source of clean fresh water, the estuaries could not serve as the vital link in the life cycle of numerous species of birds, aquatic plants (such as seagrass), and popular fish species (such as redfish, sea trout and mullet).\textsuperscript{135}

New Port Richey and Port Richey especially rely on the well fields (many already dehydrated) in Starkey Wilderness Park. If SWFWMD cannot increase the well field supply, the wetlands will provide 40 percent less water by 2007. A joint project of Tampa Bay Water, a wholesale distributor that supplies Pinellas, Hillsborough and Pasco Counties, and SWFWMD’s Pinellas-Anclote River Basin Board spent $385,000 for consultants to conduct tests on four of Starkey’s wetlands and river supply. The plan would take water from two rivers (Cotee and Anclote) and inject it into 42 acres of dehydrated wetland areas of Starkey Wilderness Park.\textsuperscript{136}

\textsuperscript{134} Recreation guide online SWFWMD, 2005.
\textsuperscript{135} Ibid.
“This is the first time we’d be using rivers for restoring wetlands on such a large scale,” said SWFWMD geologist Ron Basso. Preliminary tests done for SWFWMD’s Regional Water Supply Plan showed the possibility of nearly 3 million gallons of water per day diverted from the Anclote River during the rainy season.

However, several environmentalists said the project is a huge mistake. “We’re going to destroy an environment to fix an environment that we’ve already destroyed,” said Clay Colson, Nature Coast issue chairperson of the state chapter of the Sierra Club. In addition, he said the plan would hurt estuaries along the river without solving Pasco County’s true water problem, over pumping.137

David Guest, the managing attorney for Earthjustice, a nonprofit environmental and public interest law firm in Tallahassee, agreed that Pasco County is a problem water district. “The reason they need to do this is Pasco has been dishing out water withdrawal permits like a drunken sailor on Saturday night,” Guest said. He said it is too late to restore some of Starkey’s damaged wetlands and called the project a “cover-up” for not enough conservation. The answer is less pumping and a greater commitment to conservation. Nevertheless, Tampa Bay Water and SWFWMD believe they can restore the ecological health of the wetlands while benefiting water supply.138

In addition to draining the Cotee and Anclote Rivers, Pasco County plans to build a road extension cutting through the Serenova Preserve. The road would link New Port Richey, the Suncoast Parkway and Land O’ Lakes (U.S. 41). SWFWMD’s official position is in favor of the road, but agency land manager Kevin Love said that cutting a swath through the Serenova would seriously compromise the ecosystem.

137 Spicuzza, St. Petersburg Times, 5 July 2002.
138 Ibid.
“In an area like Central Florida and a place like Pasco County where growth seems to be rampant, every acre of really high-quality habitat like Starkey and Serenova becomes priceless,” Love said.\textsuperscript{139} He added:

The problem with the road, strictly from a conservation and land management standpoint, is that it basically bisects that patch of habitat into two patches of habitat with a hard barrier in between. That barrier makes it difficult to manage and difficult for wildlife. The Suncoast is enough of a barrier. Building the Ridge Road extension would hinder efforts to restore scrub jay habitat through logging and burning overgrown areas, processes that allow small scrub oaks and sand pines to re-establish themselves. The district’s official position as a regulatory agency has permitted the road. My position is that any preserve would be better without a major road going through it.\textsuperscript{140}

Pasco County leaders disagree. They have paid engineers and lawyers more than $3 million to design, modify and defend plans for the road extension (to be used as an additional hurricane evacuation route). County administrator John Gallagher noted that the extension has been on transportation maps for more than two decades and that before the Serenova became a preserve it was slated for development. He also argued that extending Ridge Road would be less expensive than expanding east west routes such as state roads 52 and 54 (major arteries in Pasco).\textsuperscript{141}

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\item \textsuperscript{139} Julia Ferrante, “Proposed Connector Called Road to Ruin,” \textit{Tampa Tribune}, 6 July 2005.
\item \textsuperscript{140} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{141} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
Without a voice of their own, the endangered scrub jays and wood storks are no match for fast-growing Pasco County. According to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service breeding population reports, the wood stork is as an endangered species. Wood storks use a variety of freshwater and estuarine wetlands for nesting, feeding and roosting. Freshwater colony sites must remain inundated throughout the nesting cycle to protect against predation and abandonment. Foraging sites occur in shallow, open water where prey concentrations are high enough to ensure successful feeding (Serenova). Limiting factors include loss of feeding habitat, water level manipulations affecting drainage, predation and/or nest tree regeneration, and human disturbance.

The Florida scrub jay (only bird species unique to Florida), currently designated as threatened due to loss of habitat, has declined in population by 90 percent. More will disappear as land development continues. Scrub jays are non-migratory, extremely sedentary, and have very specific habitat requirements. They reside only in oak scrub consisting of sand live oak, myrtle oak, inopine oak, along with saw palmetto, scrub palmetto, scattered sand pine and rosemary. The Serenova Tract makes a perfect home for the scrub jay.

Nevertheless, in 2006, a Tampa environmental consultant studied four potential alternatives to compensate for wetlands [destroyed] if the Ridge Road extension becomes a reality. The following are the projects under consideration and comments from a Biological Research Associates report completed in January.

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142 The Florida scrub Jay (the only bird species unique to Florida) listed as threatened by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, a petition submitted 25 January 2006 for reclassification to endangered species; the wood stork classified as endangered. The Environmental conservation online system provides access to information related to endangered species, fisheries and habitat conservation programs, http://ecos.fws.gov.


• Pithlachascotee River Corridor: Preservation of a riverfront area from State Road 52 to Crews Lake. The county already is considering buying the property through its Environmental Lands Acquisition Program (ELAMP). If that happens, officials could reimburse the preservation program with Capitol Improvement Program funds and use it as mitigation for the road project. The transaction would amount to a donation to the ELAMP program, officials say. Estimated credits, subject to state and federal approval: 9.53 to 12.71 acres.

• 4G Ranch Corridor: About 804 acres, including pasture, cropland, shrubs, brush, reservoirs and fresh water marshes. The property is part of a critical linkage that would connect the Conner Reserve owned by SWFWMD with Al Bar and Cross Bar Ranches, owned by Pinellas County. The owners have indicated they are willing to negotiate. Estimated credits for preservation: 139.8 to 148.94 acres. Possible credits for enhancement: 31.25 to 47.8 acres.

• 5-Mile Creek Corridor: An area west of U.S. 41 and east of the CSX railroad. Mitigation credits could be earned through enhancement of the property, which already is preserved. The former owner retains mining rights over a major portion of the corridor, however, and there is potential that additional mining rights exist. Estimated credits: 6.49 to 21.2 acres.

• Serenova Preserve Enhancement: The tract was set aside as partial compensation for wetlands destroyed in the construction of the Suncoast Parkway. An agreement between the county and SWFWMD, which owns the property, says Pasco may enhance the Serenova by creating wetlands or other means, as part of its mitigation for the Ridge Road extension. Potential credits: 44.44 to 85.21 acres.

  SWFWMD staff has, however, told Pasco officials that enhancement of the Serenova and other existing preserves is not as high a priority as gaining more preservation lands, said Michele Baker, Pasco’s program coordinator for engineering services. Fritz Musselmann, director of SWFWMD’s land resources department, said he was not sure why SWFWMD staff would discourage restoration of the Serenova.145

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The project has been stalled because of difficulty securing mitigation land to compensate for wetlands that would be destroyed by the road’s construction. SWFWMD, which owns the Serenova, approved a permit for the road in 2003, but the approval was based on informal deals to buy and set aside land now slated for development or held by unwilling sellers. SWFWMD and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which is reviewing a separate permit, would have to approve any changes to the plans. The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service also must determine whether construction of the road extension would hurt threatened and endangered species.\textsuperscript{146}

The owner of the 4G Ranch (one of four mitigation sites previously mentioned) in central Pasco appears willing to dedicate a portion of his ranch to preservation to push forward the Ridge Road extension project, County Administrator John Gallagher said. Not without something in return, William “Ted” Phillips, the ranch owner, has told county officials he intends to seek approval for a conservation subdivision on the ranch property to allow for a combination of houses, commercial businesses and open space. Phillips has said he would set aside 804.3 acres west of the development as a “critical linkage corridor,” which Gallagher said could compensate for wetlands destroyed by the road extension.\textsuperscript{147}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[147] Ibid.
\end{footnotes}
Anclote River Tract (Starkey Ranch)

The vast majority of the original ranch, about 13,000 acres, exists in nature preserves, mainly the Starkey Wilderness Park. Longleaf and other small developments take up about 500 acres. That leaves the remaining 2,500 acres for development.

The family wishes to build as many as 4,600 homes on the land, keeping about half the acreage in conservation for the enjoyment of future homeowners.\(^{148}\) “I knew growth would hit here,” said J.B. Starkey Jr., who became the family patriarch when his father died at 94 in 1989. “But I didn’t know it would be so fast and furious when it hit.” With the last sale of land to the state in 1995, partly to pay the $9 million estate tax bill when the elder Starkey died, the ranch could no longer sustain enough cattle to make it viable.

The development value of the land dwarfs its agricultural value. J.B. Starkey Jr., wants to make sure the land will be available for his children and grandchildren.\(^{149}\)

“We need to liquidate a pretty static asset,” said Starkey’s youngest son, Frank. “The land’s been a fantastic asset over the past 70 years, but it’s not something we can take to the grocery store.” Cattle still rule the land, but the family sold the herd in 2003 to a rancher who leases the pasture. J.B. Starkey devotes his time to running J.B. Starkey’s Flatwoods Adventures, the family ecotourism venture.\(^{150}\)

In the 1990s, the Starkey’s built Longleaf on the western edge of the ranch, a neighborhood with homes and front porches, rear alleys, village green, on-street parking and picket fences.


\(^{149}\) Ibid.

\(^{150}\) Ibid.
The next phase of development, which would finish off the ranch over the next 15 years, calls for a town center north of Gunn Highway and State Road 54 and five distinct neighborhoods of homes in the Longleaf mold. A northern swath of the 2,500 acres nearest the Anclote River will stay largely natural, according to the Starkey’s plans.151

**Twenty-first Century**

Desperate for land to build a regional park to serve the Trinity area, Pasco County officials are entertaining a radical solution, acquiring a piece of the Starkey Wilderness Park, a nature preserve that is supposed to be off-limits to development. The county has been trying to line up more than 100 acres for a super-sized park to include sports fields, trails, a swimming pool and acres of parking. Park planners have faced two problems, the price of land has been exorbitant, and sufficiently large parcels hard to find in the quickly suburbanizing region.152

Pasco County Administrator John Gallagher announced he is feeling the pressure to build ball fields to serve thousands of new families pouring into southwest Pasco. Each new homebuyer indirectly pays an impact fee of nearly $1,000, money the county is supposed to invest in parks. “While the wilderness park already operates recreation trails, picnic shelters and a campground, a regional park seems too intense for a nature preserve,” SWFWMD spokesperson Michael Molligan said.

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The water district took charge of the property to shield its environmentally sensitive terrain from development. Two rivers, the Anclote and the Pithlachascotee, water the property. When the Starkey family began donating and selling land to the state in the 1970s, the family stipulated that the land was for water management and recreation.\textsuperscript{153}

After nearly seventy years of ranching thousands of acres, the Starkey family steers a course set by other Pasco County ranchers and orange growers, converting their land to homes, stores and offices. The family’s once vast 16,000 acre spread between Odessa and New Port Richey has shrunk to 2,500 acres. Most of the land has become nature preserve, mainly the Starkey Wilderness Park. A smaller portion (500 acres) developed as the Longleaf neighborhood.\textsuperscript{154}

\textit{“In space and time - we have choice.”}\textsuperscript{155}

Frank Starkey (Starkey’s grandson), grew up on the family ranch before training to be an architect, wants the family’s new development to be the first of its kind in Pasco County. It would consume almost all of the family’s remaining 2,500 acres. The project would begin with a 40 to 80 acre “town center” on land north of Gunn Highway and State Road 54, best known as the site of the Odessa rodeo. Among the first tenants would be a grocery store. Starting in the center and fanning out from there would be 4,600 homes, a mixture of houses, townhouses, villas and apartments. Proposed amenities include a library, 16-screen movie theater, church and elementary school.\textsuperscript{156}

\textsuperscript{154} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{155} Quote by Jared Diamond, author of \textit{Collapse}, traces the fates of societies to their treatment of the environment.
\textsuperscript{156} Thorner, 21 July 2005.
With an eye toward reducing the need for long shopping trips and commutes, The Starkey’s have proposed integrating 510,000 square feet of retail, 355,000 square feet of offices and 120,000 square feet of light industry. The Starkey’s propose a loose construction schedule running to 2022. “We want to see a 24-hour place, with people living, working and shopping all together,” Frank Starkey said.\textsuperscript{157}

Frank Starkey probably could never have predicted that he would be the one about to consume his grandfather’s last 2,500 acres for construction of homes, movie theaters and shopping centers. At the age of twelve, in an interview done by the University of South Florida, remarked, “I would like [people] to respect and take care of whatever natural land they have and to realize that its God’s creation and there’s no more nature once it’s all developed. I would just like them to take care of it.”\textsuperscript{158}

\textsuperscript{158} Lawson, “Preserving for the Future.”
Conclusion

Empty spaces replace palmetto groves that once beautified the banks of the Pithlachascotee River; it still meanders through downtown making its way to the Gulf of Mexico. The annual Chasco Fiesta, special to New Port Richey, lives on as one of the largest attractions in the southeast. The median age of residents grows younger, but New Port Richey remains a well-liked destination for retirement with slightly more than 28 percent of its residents over the age of sixty-five.

Subdivisions triumph where orange groves and cattle ranches were once abundant in West Pasco. Absent in the air, the sweet and pungent fragrance of orange blossoms. Cattle ranches and green space now exist as shopping centers and Wal-Mart’s. Not exclusive to New Port Richey, downtown’s railway connection has been paved over. People no longer go downtown to the Meighan Theater for movies. Few residents know of New Port Richey’s past hopes of being the “Hollywood of the South.”

The coming together of individual communities such as Holiday, Elfers, Trinity, Port Richey and New Port Richey East, make it difficult to distinguish one town from another. New Port Richey, at the heart of this entire area is still known as “The Gateway to Tropical Florida,” but due to uncontrolled growth and development, little evidence remains of the natural beauty that previously existed.
Lack of major industry, increased traffic and crime has stripped the heart of New Port Richey from being an admired destination. Few residents feel strong attachment to this place.
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