From Punta Pinal to Peerless Pinellas [1842-1911]

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"From Punta Pinal to Peerless Pinellas"
Remarks Delivered at the Inaugural “Pinellas by the Decades” Program
Pinellas Room, Heritage Village
11 September 2011, 2:00 p.m.
by
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Welcome to the inaugural program in "Pinellas by the Decades," a series of lectures and conversations sponsored by the Pinellas County Historical Society at Heritage Village to commemorate the centennial of our independence from Hillsborough County on January 1, 1912. From now through mid-2012, we will have a program one Sunday every month, except for December 2011, to remember the rich history of our peninsula, a history that covers everything from the Anclote River in Tarpon Springs to the tip of Mullet Key by Fort DeSoto.

The focus of today's lecture is to set the stage for future programs that will examine specific decades from 1912 through 2011. We have much to cover this afternoon. We will examine a seventy-year period from the Armed Occupation Act of 1842 through the waning months of 1911, a time when excitement about our newfound sovereignty marked the landscape.

Of course, the record of settlement along the Pinellas Peninsula began much earlier than 1842. It covers a period of thousands of years, beginning with early Native American cultures that established coastal footholds and created vibrant settlements before leaving us numerous Indian mounds and middens as a record of their lives. Europeans first came to the region in the sixteenth century. In 1528, fifteen years after Juan Ponce de Leon first visited Florida, Panfilo de Narvaez sailed along the shores of Boca Ciega Bay in search of gold. Like other conquistadors, this expedition failed to uncover treasures, though subsequent visits by Spanish and English colonists did lead some sailors to establish fishing camps and rancheros.

In February 1819, the Spanish empire abandoned hopes of holding onto Florida as a colony, and entered into negotiations with the United States that led to the Adams-Onis Treaty, also known as the Transcontinental Treaty of 1819. Although the United States formally took possession of Florida in 1821, Americans had occupied the territory for many years, including a military hero of the War of 1812 who later served as our President, a man named Andrew Jackson.

Colonel George Mercer Brooke, another notable officer during the War of 1812, established a fort at the mouth of the Hillsborough River in late 1823. Fort Brooke, near the site of the present-day Tampa Convention Center, became a remote outpost and the small settlement of Tampa took shape around it in the mid-1820s. An early settler in Tampa, Odet Philippe, later moved from Tampa to the Safety Harbor area in 1832 to become the first documented permanent settler along the Pinellas peninsula.
since the indigenous population had vanished. Philippe cultivated grapefruit and soon found others coming to this area.

Between 1835 and 1842, much of the area north of Pinellas was involved in the Second Seminole War. Although few skirmishes came to Pinellas, there were some notable events. By 1839, William Bunce occupied an island that became part of present-day Tierra Verde not too far from the site of Bunce’s Pass. Bunce operated a fishing ranchero, though in October 1840 federal troops from Fort Brooke destroyed it because they thought he was sympathetic with the Seminole Indians and Cubans. In April 1841, Fort Harrison began operations along the Harbor Oaks area of Clearwater Harbor as a place for troops wounded or suffering illness during the Second Seminole War to recuperate. Named in honor of William Henry Harrison, our ninth President, Fort Harrison served as an outpost for less than seven months, though that was six months longer than Harrison occupied the White House.

The Armed Occupation Act of 1842, an act of Congress passed that August, opened much of peninsular Florida to settlers after the end of the Second Seminole War (1835-1842). Enacted as an incentive to encourage settlement along lands previously occupied by the Seminole Indians and nearby areas, homesteaders could occupy tracts of up to 160 acres on designated lands between Alachua County and the Peace River if they agreed to construct a dwelling, cultivate a minimum of five acres, live on the site for five years, and bear arms to protect against incursions from runaway Seminoles and slaves. Many historians view this act as a model for the Homestead Act of 1862. Twenty-four claims under this act included lands in present-day Pinellas County.

Before the end of the year, in November, Captain Samuel H. Stevenson filed a claim along a marsh in the area near the Clearwater/Dunedin boundary near Stevenson Creek. A month later, James Stevens, the man known as "The Father of Clearwater," received a permit for lands between Drew Street and Jeffords Street west of Fort Harrison Avenue. Stevens soon persuaded a friend in Brooksville, John S. Taylor Sr., to acquire lands south of downtown Clearwater. According to a couple of narratives, Taylor made an interesting offer on the land. A slaveholder at the time, Taylor believed that one of his female slaves had attempted to harm him and his family by poisoning their coffee. Taylor supposedly traded this slave for much of what is the core of present-day Clearwater. Along Old Tampa Bay, Odet Philippe filed a claim in January 1843. A few years later, Richard Booth, a native of England and sailor who had also spent some time at Fort Brooke, settled nearby and married Philippe’s daughter Melanie in May 1847.

By the mid-1840s, more pioneers arrived. Antonio Maximo Hernandez, a veteran of the Second Seminole War, received permission to settle at Maximo Point in southern St. Petersburg, including the area near the Eckerd College campus and Frenchman's Creek. John (Juan) Levique—called “French John” by one of the surveyors—occupied a site near the Jungle area of western St. Petersburg along Boca Ciega Bay when he received his permit in mid-1843. Alexander McKay claimed land along southern Clear Water Harbor near McKay Creek and Largo’s Harbor Hills and Anona areas. By the time Florida had obtained statehood on March 3, 1845, James Parramore McMullen had already journeyed to the area
along Alligator Creek near the site of his cabin at Coachman and Old Coachman. His six brothers would soon follow. The cabin now occupies a prominent spot at Heritage Village.

These settlers lived in a remote area. Without a boat, travel to Tampa along small dirt paths took more than a day. Their quiet was disrupted in late September 1848 by a hurricane known as the "Gale of '48." The most destructive hurricane to hit the Pinellas peninsula in recorded history, this storm destroyed the original lighthouse at Egmont Key, obliterated Fort Brooke, brought storm surges approaching fifteen feet into Tampa Bay, and carved the channel at Johns Pass where once a single island of "Long Key" had existed.

In early 1849, six months after the storm, the federal government issued an Executive Order calling for the creation of a military reservation in the Mullet Key area. Robert E. Lee, then a colonel based out of Baltimore, spent time along the Florida coastline conducting surveys. Lee insisted that the United States should fortify the islands along the northern mouth of Tampa Bay for defensive purposes. Lee later fought for the Confederacy, and plans to establish what would become Fort DeSoto had to wait for nearly a half-century.

During the late antebellum period, a handful of notable pioneer families homesteaded along the Pinellas Peninsula, harvested crops, raised livestock, and shipped products to ports at Cedar Keys, Key West, and Tampa. According to the 1850 federal census, the entire Pinellas Peninsula had a population of 178 people who lived as a total of 35 families. In late 1851, David B. Turner and Mary Campbell Turner settled at Indian Rocks before later moving to the site of present-day Clearwater. Their son, Arthur Campbell Turner, would later play an important role in the development of mid and upper-Pinellas. A veteran of the Second Seminole War, Richard Leroy Garrison received an 1852 land grant along both sides of Curlew Creek, near the site of the present-day Dunedin Country Club, becoming the first person to homestead in what is now Dunedin. Soon, other settlers followed. One of them, Major A. G. Anderson, even erected a cotton gin operated by horses at the site of Dunedin's Edgewater Park. This gin remained in operation and Sea Island cotton was harvested in the area until a hurricane destroyed the gin in 1884.

Families were started and children needed schooling. In 1853 or thereabouts, James P. McMullen erected the first school on the Pinellas Peninsula, a simple log cabin at a site south of Sunset Point/Main Street and US Highway 19. Before the construction of the school, students occasionally met in the attic of McMullen sugarhouse. Jim McMullen constructed the benches and teacher's desk. Known as the "McMullen Log School," family members also called the school Sylvan Abbey, the name of the first teacher's daughter. Soon thereafter, Jim McMullen and Dick Booth decided to build a larger one-room structure with a chimney on land east of McMullen cabin. That building later served as the Sylvan Abbey Church. John S. Taylor Sr. launched the first public school in 1855, on the campus of Clearwater High School.
By 1854, there was even talk of David Levy Yulee bringing his railroad from Fernandina (north of Jacksonville) to Tampa Bay. In the spring, surveyors looked at areas near the unpopulated lands of present-day downtown St. Petersburg. That November, William Paul returned to a possible dock site for this railroad, near present site of the Vinoy Hotel. Paul, a carpenter on the spring expedition, decided to cultivate citrus at this location, the first substantial orange grove in lower Pinellas. By this time, Philippe and Booth had established notable groves near Safety Harbor, Oldsmar, and Clearwater. The Third Seminole War, lasting from 1855 through 1858, derailed Yulee’s plans to bring the iron horse to Tampa Bay; instead, he selected Cedar Keys as the Gulf of Mexico terminus for his railroad.

Early cattle farming also came to the lower Pinellas Peninsula when James R. Hay took on the job of watching herds for Tampa's cattle families along a parcel near Lakeview Avenue (Twenty-Second Avenue South) in 1856. A year later, Abel Miranda, a native of St. Augustine of Cuban ancestry, decided to settle along the lower Pinellas Peninsula with his wife, Eliza. He had fought in the skirmishes of the Third Seminole War during 1856 and became a first lieutenant. He obtained the remaining structures erected by William Paul and moved them south from the present Vinoy to an area along Big Bayou near the Driftwood neighborhood of St. Petersburg. By 1859, Eliza's brothers, John Bethell and William Bethell, settled at Little Bayou and developed a small ranchero that harvested mullet from the bay and gulf waters. This area south of downtown St. Petersburg soon became a settlement known as "Pinellas." Before the end of the year, the first post office on the peninsula was established at Clear Water Harbor and "Captain" Jim McMullen won election as a commissioner in Hillsborough County. The election returns from the peninsula show that a total of eight votes were cast on the Pinellas Peninsula, all by men, of course, since women were not allowed to vote.

On the eve of the Civil War, the Pinellas Peninsula had fewer than 400 residents scattered in isolated farming and fishing settlements. Tensions escalated in the Southern states following the election of Abraham Lincoln and, on January 10, 1861, Florida seceded from the Union. Shortly after the attack on Fort Sumter in April, President Abraham Lincoln called for a blockade along Florida’s sparsely populated shoreline. He employed a tactic devised by General Winfield Scott known as the Anaconda Strategy. By the early summer, many heads of pioneer families joined the Confederate military or state forces, though there is no evidence that they had slaves of their own. Captain John Thomas Lowe of the Anona area, along with others in the Lowe and Meares families, prepared to leave their settlements on the intracoastal waterway to engage in distant battles. As the Union blockade strangled Confederate commerce in the area, James P. McMullen and other approximately sixty other men from Western Hillsborough came together as a military unit. Some of these men later served in the "cow cavalry" that drove cattle at “grazing speed” due to a lack of railroads in peninsular Florida and, through their efforts, kept food in the bellies of Confederate soldiers.

As the Civil War continued, contact between settlements along the Pinellas Peninsula and other coastal ports, such as Cedar Keys, became more difficult. On occasion, Union ships made sailing to Tampa a dangerous endeavor, so those seeking provisions often traveled by land. With salt in short supply, settlers along the coastline resorted to boiling saltwater on the beaches or in the brush out of the view...
of any ships that might pass by their location. A few quarts of salt might be the result after a long day of boiling, but their efforts allowed them to preserve meats.

Although Florida experienced few battles during the Civil War years (1861-1865), many local residents did abandon their homesteads to fight in the war or to transport beef, pork, and other provisions to the front lines. A few skirmishes occurred along the gulf coast and Tampa Bay, with the most notable happening in February 1862 when United States troops from Egmont Key decided to attack Abel Miranda’s settlement at Big Bayou. Miranda and his wife scurried across the lower peninsula to the residence of William T. Coon as Union forces fired cannons at the site. When Miranda returned, he found that the Union forces had destroyed his home, fences, and other buildings, killed many of his orange trees, took many of his chickens and hogs, robbed him of other provisions, and stole a sloop.

With the war’s end in April 1865, residents tried to restore order in their remote area. Provisions had been difficult to acquire, some families had abandoned their farmsteads, and the little infrastructure that existed was in disrepair. Less than a year later, Rev. Cooley S. (C. S.) Reynolds oversaw the construction of a small log structure and became the first pastor of the Midway Baptist Church (of Clearwater), one of the first formally established churches on the Pinellas Peninsula. The pastor’s younger sister, Jennie Reynolds Plumb, conducted the first organized school classes for the community in this structure by 1874. John Bethell returned to Big Bayou by 1867. He acquired some of the improvements made by Miranda and other land acreage. Bethell remembered that many people simply squatted upon land during the Reconstruction era. With few settlers nearby, people took control of a plot, fenced it in if necessary, grew crops, and moved on without paying taxes on the land. That same year, James and Rebecca Bennett arrived in the area of present-day Gulfport and cleared several acres near the bayside at 52nd Street for crops. Also, Frederick Meyer came to the Tarpon Springs area from Marion County and settled north of the Anclote River. His brother, Franklin B."Benjamin" Meyer, arrived a few months later. Their family founded the settlement of Anclote, west of present-day Tarpon Springs. Green Meyer established the first general store at Anclote.

The following year, in 1868, John and Anna Germain Donaldson traveled by oxcart from Alabama to the lower Pinellas Peninsula as servants of Louis Bell Jr. and his family. John worked for Bell in the fields, and Anna served as a housekeeper. They settled on forty acres in the area of southwestern St. Petersburg/Gulfport and became the first African-American settlers in St. Petersburg. They remained after Bell sold his interests and left. They were among the few blacks who had moved to Pinellas before the construction of the Orange Belt Railway in 1888.

North of Largo, Daniel “Uncle Dan” McMullen had returned to the Largo area in the fall of 1865. By August 1868, he, wife Margaret Ann Campbell McMullen, and their family moved into a new home. The McMullen House, now located here at Heritage Village, would be continuously occupied by members of the McMullen family for more than 120 years, the longest period of time a single family has owned and occupied the same home in the recorded history of Pinellas.
By 1869, Curlew Pioneer Cemetery was established in the Palm Harbor area along the extension of Belcher Road just north of Curlew Road on land donated by John Alexander Sutton. Noticing the many pink curlews along the coast, John called the adjacent church Curlew Methodist and soon the name "Curlew” was used throughout the settlement. James Kilgore of Anona served as the first minister on a part-time basis. According to the church history, Kilgore usually walked eighteen miles from Anona to Curlew on Saturday, preached his sermons, and walked back to Anona on Monday.

More settlers arrived in the 1870s. In 1870, John L. Branch built the first store along Dunedin's waterfront, Charles Wharton Johnson arrived along the bluffs south of Clearwater after getting shipwrecked and soon settled his family in the Largo area, while native Virginian William Alexander Belcher came to the area of Belcher Road south of Allen’s Creek because he feared he would get tuberculosis in the cold northern winters. Meanwhile, early spongers from Key West began harvesting sponges from the waters near Tarpon Springs.

In the early 1870s, Elza Beasley Lealman, a former sheriff, tax collector, and property appraiser of Suwannee County, arrived in lower Pinellas and settled with his family in the area that soon took his name. He grew citrus and had a large strawberry farm as well. By July 1873, Rev. Cooley S. Reynolds established the first newspaper along the Pinellas Peninsula when he launched the Clear Water Times. In the August 23, 1873 issue, Cooley included the following passage: “Our climate is almost unequaled. Our population is industrious and moral. These will ensure prosperity. With the finest cotton, sugar cane, tropical fruits, and rice, we have only to persevere for a few years and become independent.”

Formal settlements took shape by the mid-1870s. James P. McMullen established an organized settlement near the northern end of the Bayside Bridge known as Bay View. A few miles up the road named for McMullen and Richard Booth, Robert D. Hoyt established a nursery at Seven Oaks where he was credited with cultivating the large kapok tree at this location, near McMullen-Booth Road and Alligator Creek. By 1875, Detroit native John Constantine Williams came to Florida and spent time along the Pinellas Peninsula near the site of present-day St. Petersburg. He sought a moderate climate due to his asthma. In January 1876, W. F. Spurlin sold his property to John C. Williams. Williams secured other tracts from the state’s Internal Improvement Fund, bringing his total acreage to 1,600--most of St. Petersburg's downtown west to Sixteenth Street near Tropicana Field--at a cost of $3,800. Although often referred to as "General Williams," he never held such a military rank, but his business decisions on his holdings in lower Pinellas would make him a ranking officer of sorts a decade later.

As Reconstruction came to an end in the southern states in 1877, new construction came to Pinellas. The "Pinellas" settlement south along Big Bayou had a post office, George L. Jones had reached the Dunedin area by schooner and briefly gave the settlement the name "Jonesboro" while running a general store, and Bahamas native Joshua Boyer sailed along the Anclote River to Spring Bayou. At that site, he met Alexander Ormond and his daughter, Mary Ormond, two of the few settlers between Curlew/Palm Harbor and Anclote. In April, Joshua and Mary wed and built a small cottage that is located
at Heritage Village. By 1880, Mary Boyer saw a "tarpon spring" from the bayou and the new settlement was given its name. Before the 1870s came to an end, John O. Douglas and James Somerville arrived at the settlement then known as "Jonesboro." Natives of Edinburgh in Scotland, they established a store, and did not like the name "Jonesboro," instead preferring "Dunedin," a Gaelic name for Edinburgh. Soon, Tarpon Springs and Dunedin had their present names.

Another important name, that of Hamilton Disston, would reshape settlement patterns as the 1880s began. By that year, the peninsula's population had soared past 1,100 hardy souls. In late February 1881, the state's Internal Improvement Fund agreed to sell four million acres of land to Hamilton Disston in exchange for $1 million to settle a debt. Approximately 150,000 acres of this land fell within the present-day boundaries of Pinellas County.

By early 1882, Captain John B. Walton, a surveyor, arrived along the upper Pinellas Peninsula with Major Mathew Robinson Marks and other members of an advance party sent by Disston to inspect lands he had recently purchased from the State of Florida. Before the end of the year, Anson Peacely Killen Safford, third governor of the Arizona Territory, also reached the remote homestead of Joshua and Mary Boyer near Spring Bayou. In addition to surveying the future site of Tarpon Springs, J.B. Walton also platted the area that became known as "Yellow Bluff," now the unincorporated area of Ozona. The name “Yellow Bluff” fell out of favor quickly, especially after outbreaks of yellow fever threatened to decimate Tampa's population in the 1880s.

Soon, the Disston Land Company and its companion, the Gulf Coast Land Company, had agents trying to sell lands in Western Hillsborough to investors in the Northeastern United States, as well as England and other areas of Europe.

By 1884, Disston focused his efforts on his land holdings in lower Pinellas. Planning for the construction of the first hotel on the lower Pinellas Peninsula, he had lumber shipped in from Apalachicola for the structure he named the Waldorf. Built quickly at a site along Boca Ciega Bay, the Waldorf opened in what is now Gulfport in December 1884. The exact configuration of the hotel and its location remain mysteries to this day. No photographs of the Waldorf are known to exist and anyone having a first-hand recollection of it perished long ago. Disston promoted the hotel and many guests from England and the Northeast did make the cumbersome journey by boat to visit, beginning in 1885. Also in 1884, a Union veteran of the Civil War, Captain Zephaniah Phillips, become the first settler who homesteaded along Long Key, near the southern end of the island at Pass-a-Grille.

Two events in April 1885 shifted the focus in lower Pinellas from Disston's holdings at Disston City, now Gulfport, to lands in present-day St. Petersburg. On April 20, the Orange Belt Railway was incorporated as a line to provide rail service between Lake Monroe (near Sanford) and Lake Apopka, a distance of less than forty miles. A native of Russia, Peter Demens, gained control of the railroad after the original owners failed to pay him for $9,400 in railroad ties he provided. Demens joined with Andrew Johnson,
an attorney from Orlando, to draw up papers that established the Orange Belt Investment Company. Demens moved forward with plans to connect the railway near Sanford with the Pinellas Peninsula.

Originally, Demens had worked with Disston, who sought an alternative rail line after Henry B. Plant's system had arrived in Tampa. Disston offered generous tracts of land as Demens built the rail towards Disston's holdings. We will once again talk about the railroad and its historic left turn, after mentioning a lecture delivered on April 29 by Baltimore physician Washington Chew Van Bibber at the national convention of the American Medical Association in New Orleans. According to Van Bibber's research, he had claimed he had found the perfect site of a "Health City" at Point Pinellas near Maximo Point. Shortly after the conference, Van Bibber's associates had acquired a deed for some of the lands in what is now southern St. Petersburg with hopes of making profits from his claims. Van Bibber became one of the early real estate promoters of what is now St. Petersburg.

With plans for a railroad in the works, William Alexander Belcher, a member of the Florida House of Representatives living in the Bay View area, proposed an 1886 measure to remove the Pinellas Peninsula from Hillsborough and form a separate county named "Gulf County." Senator Joseph B. Wall of Tampa killed this separation measure. Although this effort failed, the seeds were planted into the ground. A person who helped this movement take shape in the early 1900s arrived from Georgia in 1886 as well. Solomon Smith Coachman became a contractor and played a role in the construction of many buildings in the Clearwater area during the late 1800s. He built one of the first brick buildings in Pinellas in 1894. Coachman purchased the James P. McMullen homestead (with the log house that is now at Heritage Village) in about 1901 and became an early advocate for independence from Hillsborough and for Clearwater becoming the county seat of Pinellas.

By 1887, the Orange Belt Railway reached the small and remote settlements of upper Pinellas, including Tarpon Springs and Yellow Bluff (now Ozona). As the railroad moved south, royalty arrived near Lake Tarpon when George Sutherland-Leveson-Gower, a cousin of Queen Victoria with the title of the Duke of Sutherland, came to Florida's west coast in the mid-1880s. Sutherland, the original name given to the settlement at Palm Harbor, was selected to honor the Duke's presence. The railroad took a notable and historic turn in 1887 when negotiations between Demens's agent and John C. Williams led to an agreement in which Williams would convey 250 acres along the present-day waterfront of downtown St. Petersburg to Peter Demens if he steered his Orange Belt Railway to that location rather than Disston's lands in Gulfport. As the railroad reached this site, a handful of folks in the area signed a petition that Post Office Department approved to make "St. Petersburg" the official name of the settlement.

As St. Petersburg's few residents prepared for the regularly scheduled service of the Orange Belt to begin in June 1888, Henry Scharrer, a native of Switzerland, arrived on Caladesi (Hog) Island after setting sail from Tampa and encountering a storm while approaching Dunedin Pass. After exploring the island, he returned to Tampa and began the process of gaining title to the island. In the Seminole/Oakhurst area, English native Robert Leach arrived and developed groves along the mainland
near Boca Ciega Bay. That same year, Largo’s post office began operations with Malcolm J. McMullen serving as postmaster and Peter Demens’s Detroit Hotel opened for business in the sparse landscape of what would become the "Sunshine City."

The railroad connected the Pinellas Peninsula with the outside world, but also suffered from financial problems from the outset. In June 1889, one year after service had started, the railroad began offering discount trips from destinations in central Florida to the west coast. The railroad promoted the “cooler” summer breezes found at "St. Petersburg-by-the-Sea" compared to inland areas. While coastal areas of Florida tend to be cooler than the interior, one may debate the merits of taking a cross-state railroad journey to cool off a couple of degrees. As the debt mounted, Demens had to forfeit his ownership of the line before the end of the decade, and Henry Plant soon took possession of the railroad.

The railroad did bring African American settlers who came in search of work on the railroad and in the groves. The construction of the Orange Belt Railway required laborers who came from other areas, including more than 100 African American workers and family members who followed the railroad to its terminus in St. Petersburg. South of the tracks and west of Dr. Martin Luther King (Ninth) Street, Leon Cooper owned land that became known as Cooper’s Quarters, an early settlement for African Americans in St. Petersburg. Families of African ancestry also started to arrive from Key West, the Bahamas, and other areas of the Caribbean to work in the early sponge industry based at Tarpon.

In 1891, John K. Cheyney formed the Anclote and Rock Island Sponge Company with support from Hamilton Disston’s business interests. The creation of this company was an important step for Tarpon as it became a center for the sponge diving industry in Florida. The following year, Dunedin resident Arthur Lewis Duncan introduced the first named variety of grapefruit grown in the United States, the Duncan grapefruit. Within twenty years, groves blanketed much of the peninsula, with a large concentration in the area surrounding Largo, incorporated in 1905, as a community known as "Citrus City."

A growing population sought a growing level of governance. On leap day, February 29, 1892, voters approved a measure to incorporate St. Petersburg as a town by a vote of fifteen to eleven. The two major political factions at the time were the Open-Salooners and Anti-Salooners, the "wets" and "drys" who each wanted to control government; the "drys" held control. In early March, St. Petersburg’s young government passed its first ordinance, calling for "protection of peace and morals" and approved a measure outlawing the "running at large of hogs within the corporate limits of the town." In 1893, the first women’s organization of the city, the Park Improvement Association, came together to sponsor improvements at Williams Park, then known as "City Park." They sponsored "Park Day" to bring attention to the significance of the site, funded the construction of a fence to keep livestock away from the park, and raised money to build the first Williams Park bandstand. By the first decade of the 1900s, vibrant Women’s Town Improvement Associations located in St. Petersburg and Tarpon Springs offered women a chance to lobby in the political sphere twenty years before the Nineteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution permitted them to cast ballots.
Although small municipalities had started to take shape, agriculture and aquaculture remained more important than tourism. Before the railroads brought tourists, they were instrumental in reducing the shipping times of crops to distant markets. Terrible freezes in December 1894 and February 1895 did substantial damage to local crops, however, hurting the local economy. With ridership falling and crops in peril, the syndicate that had taken control of the Orange Belt decided to transfer it to Henry Plant, the shipping and railroad magnate that had brought the rails to Tampa. This, my friends, marked one of the earliest salvos in the St. Petersburg/Tampa, Pinellas/Hillsborough rivalries. Many people assume that the bantering across the bay began with the decision to put USF’s first campus in Tampa, or the supremacy of Tampa International Airport over St. Petersburg/Clearwater International Airport after TIA opened in 1971, or perhaps in the simmering debates over the best location for major league franchises. No, this rivalry had come into existence before the first railroad spike had its first speck of rust!

In January 1897, the elegant Belleview Biltmore Hotel officially opened. This hotel became the site for one of the earliest Tampa-St. Petersburg regional rivalries. With his opulent Tampa Bay Hotel (now the University of Tampa) adorning the western side of the Hillsborough River in Tampa, Plant wanted to build another hotel at the end of the Orange Belt Railway in St. Petersburg. After St. Petersburg residents scoffed at his plans, he acquired the site in the Belleair area and construction began on what was originally known as the Hotel Bellevue in 1895. Before the end of the century, articles in Tampa newspapers began complaining about the quality of water on this side of the bay, while those arriving in St. Petersburg on Plant’s steamships were told how much better our water was than the water available in Tampa. Whether its drinking water and Rays baseball teams, the tug-o-war has continued ever since!

Distant events did promote regional identity, however. The explosion of the U.S.S. Maine in the harbor of Havana in February 1898 put the United States and Spain on a path leading towards war. Tampa and the Tampa Bay region had established strong connections to Cuba, a colony of the Spanish empire at the time, and many locals supported Cuban independence from Spain. On April 24, the United States formally declared war on Spain, officially beginning hostilities known either as the Spanish-American War or the War of 1898. The Tampa Bay region hosted approximately 30,000 troops during this brief war, including nearly 16,000 that embarked from Port Tampa on June 7. Important legacies of the war were the expansion of military facilities on Egmont Key and the creation of nearby Fort DeSoto on Mullet Key.

At the dawn of the twentieth century, Pinellas communities began to take shape. George Lizotte had opened the first hotel at Pass-a-Grille. City leaders in St. Petersburg began to explore the possibilities of a deepwater harbor in September 1900 and, by the end of 1901, Frank Allston Davis and his associates launched the St. Petersburg and Gulf Railway Company with partners such as Jacob Disston and George Gandy. Within a couple of years, a streetcar line took shape that would connect various areas of St. Petersburg and extend to the Gulfport Casino, where passengers could then board a boat for excursions to Pass-a-Grille before bridges spanned to the beaches. In 1902, the first tourist or state society, representing winter visitors from Illinois, was established in St. Petersburg, a precursor to the springtime
celebration that would be known internationally as the Festival of States. That same year, the Clearwater Pier Company opened the first public dock in that city at the foot of Cleveland Street.

Fifteen years after the Orange Belt had first arrived, St. Petersburg officially incorporated as a city in June 1903. Before the end of the year, a former salt water taffy maker from Rhode Island, Noel A. Mitchell arrived. He would transform himself into an important promoter of St. Petersburg and the nearby Pinellas beaches, helping to establish the city's chamber of commerce. Known as the “Sand Man,” Mitchell’s legacy extended beyond St. Petersburg’s city limits. He bought much of the area around John’s Pass by the early 1910s, creating the Mitchell Beach development long before bridges connected to area to the mainland or Treasure Island and Madeira Beach came into existence.

Indeed, beaches and coastal areas were important for tourism, but also for the harvests from the Gulf. In 1905, John M. Cocoris, a sponge agent who first came from his native Greece to America in 1895, received financial support from John Cheyney that allowed him to bring the first team of Greek sponge divers to Tarpon. Indian Rocks Beach’s first hotel for tourists, the Knox Hotel, opened for business that same year.

As tourists arrived, the need for improved roadways sparked outrage with the unsympathetic commissioners in Tampa, the seat of Hillsborough County. For example, in 1906, county officials in Tampa offered a referendum to issue bonds for improved roads. To get residents of Western Hillsborough to support the measure, officials in Tampa pledged that they would include better roads to the coast. Instead of improving roads in upper Pinellas, they spent most of the funds on roads around Tampa, including Seminole Heights and Hyde Park. This moved helped to fuel the movement to create an independent Pinellas County.

Angered by Tampa’s lack of concern for Western Hillsborough, W.L. Straub, the editor of the St. Petersburg Times, printed an appeal known as the “Pinellas Declaration of Independence” in the February 23, 1907 issue of his newspaper. He argued that the cost of creating the new county was minimal and that “the organization of Pinellas County would not cost its people any more than they are paying now” to Tampa. In response to growing sentiments for independence fueled in part by W.L. Straub’s Declaration, state Rep. W.W.K. Decker of Tarpon Springs encouraged the Florida House of Representatives to pass a division bill. At that time, the representative for Hillsborough County was in Western Hillsborough and the senator, James E. Crane, hailed from Tampa. There was some hope that Crane would push the bill through the Senate, however, because he had served as the first mayor of Clearwater and lived on the Pinellas side for many years. Crane yielded to pressure from Tampa, however, and prevented the bill from moving through the Senate. The measure became a focal point of the 1908 legislative elections in Hillsborough County and another attempt in 1909 failed to gain momentum.

A bridge project launched in 1910 helped to fuel the independence movement. Members of the Hillsborough Board of County Commissioners awarded a contract for a bridge across Long Bayou/Cross
Bayou. According to the agreement, St. Petersburg and other local business interests paid one-quarter of the approximate $10,000 cost for this bridge, with Hillsborough County covering the balance. Known as the "Johns Pass" bridge at the time because it connected western St. Petersburg with the Seminole/Largo area at a point near the old Johns Pass settlement in present-day War Veteran’s Memorial Park, this is the site of the present-day bridge at Bay Pines.

Let’s come back to the bridge in a moment, but first talk about events in Tallahassee. During the 1911 legislative session, W.L. Straub and other local officials lobbied the legislature to pass a bill creating Pinellas County. The bill won approval despite opposition by Rep. Hugh Somerville of Dunedin and did receive support from Sen. Don C. McMullen to pass the Senate. It became Chapter 6247, Laws of Florida, upon approval in May 1911, and soon received Governor A. W. Gilchrist’s signature. Mission accomplished? Not quite yet. The measure required voter approval of those in the area that would be eligible for separation. A November 14 referendum was scheduled. Here’s where that rickety bridge at Cross Bayou came into play ...

Finished during the summer of 1911, the bridge collapsed shortly after it opened when a man and his team of mules reached the midpoint and the structure toppled under the weight of the animals due to poor construction. Angry residents of the Pinellas Peninsula, then a part of western Hillsborough County, demanded answers from the distant county seat in Tampa. They viewed this poorly constructed bridge as the latest of many slaps in their face. Officials on the other side of Tampa Bay showed indifference and voters in November showed their anger when they voted by a large margin to support the division bill. Pinellas County became a separate county on January 1, 1912.

Today, we have covered more than seventy years of history in less than sixty minutes, and what a busy time it was! Future programs will continue to examine our county’s fascinating history from the moment of independence through the challenges and opportunities we face today. I hope you will join us for the upcoming events as we examine “Pinellas by the Decades.” Thank you very much.

I would now be happy to take questions from the audience ...