

THE HISTORY OF SANDPIPER BAY

Courtesy of the Port St Lucie Historical Society

The Early Years

Sandpiper Bay was where General Development Corp. chose to build the first homes and businesses inside the incorporated city. It is appropriate that what the City has designated as the Sandpiper Bay Neighborhood includes the location along the river where a city historical museum is being planned.

The Sandpiper Bay area is also home to much of the history that predates GDC.



The Indian Mound in Spruce Bluff, across the North Fork from Sandpiper Bay, is the first indication there was habitation in the area. Studies of the mound have uncovered few clues, only small fragments, or bone pieces. It was first noted in 1853 by a surveyor surveying for homesteaders under the Armed Occupation Act of 1842.

Some Florida archeologists have said the site may be “pre-ceramic archaic,” meaning it could be 3,000 to 5,000 years old. Anyway, we know the area was occupied by Native Peoples, including the Ais, whom Spanish explorer Jonathan Dickenson described as “cannibalistic” in the 1500s. Over the years a number of indigenous peoples have hunted and fished there, including the Seminoles.

John Enos Fultz Jr. had moved to Florida, at Cocoa, with his family in 1888. His wife died and his house burned down, so he decided to move his family to the west bank of the North Fork of the St. Lucie River in the early 1890s. Others soon followed and he remarried.

In September 1891, Fultz petitioned for a post office and the name Spruce Bluff was adopted. For \$10 a month he navigated the river back and forth to Stuart, then called Potsdam, to deliver the mail.

There settlers grew pineapples and citrus and set up an apiary to collect and sell honey. Their crops were shipped north, notably to Baltimore. Life was tough, men had to find work between crops to support their families. They fished and hunted for deer, wild boar and turkey. The pineapples and other crops came to an end in the severe freezes in the winter of 1894-95.

In the late 1890s, William F. and Harley A. Crews came to operate a sawmill near stands of pine or cypress. It would be moved as the trees were depleted. The sawmill brought the first African Americans to the area.

In 1896, a school opened, and the teacher boarded with one of the families. Discouraged, most of the families, including Fultz’s, moved to Fort Pierce. When St. Lucie County was carved from Brevard in 1905, Fultz became the first Clerk of the Circuit Court. When he died in 1954, he owned more than 600 acres of the Spruce Bluff area.

Over the years, much of the land that is now Port St. Lucie was bought by ranchers. However, maps of the large ranch holdings do not include the Sandpiper Bay area. It is assumed there were other large landowners in the area as well as smaller farms and ranches.

In the early 1930s, a scrawny, ambitious Georgia boy with ancestors going back to the Civil and Revolutionary wars, came down to Florida to sell, repair and



test motorboats. Burt Pruitt also liked to fish and soon was building an active guiding business that took him to the St. Lucie Inlet and into the North Fork. Throughout his career, this included many of the rich and sort of famous who frequented Palm Beach.

His story is indicative of the rough-and-tumble frontier lives that were common in the Florida as late as the 1930s and 40s. In the late 30s, Pruitt shot and killed a man he said was trying to steal his wife Cora Leigh and break up his home. Cora Leigh had left with her son for Reno to join her mother. After years of trials and retrials, Pruitt was sentenced to seven years in prison in 1939 for manslaughter. He was not imprisoned for long. By the early 1940s, he was out and building a fishing camp on the east bank of the North Fork, in the area that became a failed development called Tesoro in the early 2000s. It is now known as Rivella.

Bootleggers and moonshiners were still in the woods along the river, and Pruitt probably knew all of them. Pruitt continued to guide fishing trips for visitors and locals hold wild parties at the camp. Wives were not invited, but that did not mean there were no women there. You can imagine what tales he could tell about his customers. This may be why when he shot and killed his mother-in-law and brother-in-law at the camp site and he and Cora Leigh turned themselves in, he spent only a week in jail. His wife had been released immediately. Pruitt said the mother and son were there to kill him, and they probably were. The pair thought, and perhaps knew, he was being abusive to Cora Leigh. A grand jury, made up of local men, decided it was self-defense.

By 1962, GDC started asking to buy the 163 acres of wilderness Pruitt owned along the river. By then he was known as a law-abiding citizen and conservationist, in addition to having fishing prowess. He sold the land to GDC in 1968 and stayed on for two years before leaving the camp. He died in 1980 and is buried with his son in Riverview Cemetery in Fort Pierce. Cora Leigh lived until 1998. She was buried next to Burt, but cemetery records show her body was disinterred and sent to Tennessee for reburial. That was at the request of her family.

For more on this story, click pslhistory.org/pruitt-fish.

THE GENERAL DEVELOPMENT ERA



The answer was often “At the big shell on U.S. 1.”

Also, in 1953, *Look* magazine publisher Gardner Cowles of Iowa was discovering the area between Fort Pierce and Stuart. He platted a new community there, called River Park.

Not long afterwards, the three Mackle brothers, heads of one of Florida’s major developers and home builders, made a deal to take over Cowles land and they bought some more. With Cowles, and Canadian businessman Louis Chesler, they formed General Development Corporation, and went on to buy more big chunks of ranchland.

An October 1956 ad promotes the opening of “Port St. Lucie” to sell houses that now are actually in River Park. You could get a lot for \$10 down and \$10 a month. By 1959, there were eight models ready to be shown in a “fenced home show” in Port St. Lucie/River Park. For example, you could contract for the two-bed, one-bath Georgian Park for \$12,270, with \$370 down and monthly payments of \$79. You entered the show through a model on land of an old-time stern wheeler named the St. Lucie Queen. Inside was a calliope reported to have been built in Germany in 1880, and, you can bet, sales offices.

In February 1961, shortly before the incorporation of PSL, GDC officially opened the Port St. Lucie Country Club (now known as Club Med Sandpiper) as a sales and convention center. Florida Governor Farris Bryant did the honors.



Morningside Boulevard and Monte Vista Street were lined with one-, two- and three-bedroom villas, fully furnished, with maid service and central TV, for prospective lot and home buyers to rent. Morningside does not look much different today than it did when it first opened.

Florida State Representative Rupert Smith introduced the bill of incorporation that would be signed by Governor Farris on April 27, 1961. Smith later became city attorney and a circuit judge.

The partially inhabited River Park area was not included because residents had indicated they wanted a lifestyle free of municipal responsibilities such as taxes and probably would have voted against incorporation. GDC’s formation of a “paper city” also left several other inhabited enclosed enclaves.

By 1970, the U.S. Census showed only 330 residents in the city. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, that had grown to 201,846 by July 1, 2019. Other sources have estimated the population by mid-2020 to be over 206,000. The land area of the city has grown from 70 square miles to 117 square miles



Golf was a draw to the city from the beginning. The Sinners Course opened with the Port St. Lucie Country Club. The new course drew top name golfers, like Sam Snead. In August 1961, the 11th hole was dedicated in his name.

The Saints, now a public city course, opened that Thanksgiving with the first of many Perry Como Amateur Invitationals.



The Brass Sandpiper Restaurant did not open until 1975 and soon became a favorite for a night out or a special event. At that time, the public had access to a road that looped through the resort. The then-called Sandpiper Bay Resort was a social center in the south part of the city. In the north, activities centered around the North Port St. Lucie Marina on Prima Vista.



The first Port St. Lucie City Hall was in the straight section of Sandpiper Bay Plaza, next to a "Country Store." The first Mayor, William Farmer, was a GDC employee appointed to the job. The first City Council elections were scheduled for 1964. They did not occur until 1965, when there were only 50 votes. Initially the council chose a Mayor from its members. It was not until 1977 that the residents elected a Mayor. The first elected Mayor was William B. McChesney, a retired Sears executive from Chicago who lived in Sandpiper Bay and served until 1990.

The City did not have a police force of its own until 1980. Law enforcement was in the hands of St. Lucie County Sheriff's deputies.

The Port St. Lucie Historical Society

The Port St. Lucie Historical Society began in 1995 when a small group of women who wanted to preserve the history of the city met over burgers and fries at Johnny's Restaurant. The Society incorporated in April 1997, leading to years of speakers, events and helping with the City's anniversaries.

From 2008 through 2011, the Society, under the direction of Sandpiper Bay resident Richard McAfoos worked in cooperation with the Celebration Executive Committee making plans for the City's 50th Anniversary. The Society published a 191-page history book and produced a full-length docudrama. They can be purchased and you can join at the PSL Historical Society's web store, pslhistory.org

Currently, under Chair and former mayor Patricia Christensen, the group holds gatherings with speakers and dinner for members, maintains archives using professional museum software, produces a web site with information of past and present and provides speakers to local groups.

The City, through years of negotiations, owns almost 10 acres of riverfront land on Westmoreland Boulevard. Plans are for the development on a third of this include an historical museum among other attractions, including a riverside restaurant and children's playground. It's perfectly located at the heart of so much of the city's early history ... including the beginnings in Sandpiper Bay.



Work has begun on two Peacock Ranch buildings, registered with the state as "historic." The Port St. Lucie Historical Society hopes to use these for museum purposes. The buildings had been moved from western Fort Pierce to the C.T. McCarty Ranch, 3,100 acres of largely old Florida pine lands. The city purchased the McCarty property in 2012 and incorporated it into the city limits in 2013, with plans to use it as a water storage and treatment facility to help meet the city's water demands for decades to come.

For a detailed history of the city through 2011, get [*Port St. Lucie at 50: A City for All People*](#).

For more historical information about the city and activities of the historical Society, visit pslhistory.org.

Compiled by Mary Dodge with thanks