



Summer 2015

Gulfport Historical Society

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GulfportHistoricalSociety.org



Gulfport has had many names: Disston City, Bonifacio, Veteran's City (also spelled "Vetran's City"), and, most recently, Gulfport. Change epitomizes the small town by the bay, and nowhere is that evolution more apparent than at the water's edge. Not only has the commerce surrounding the shoreline changed, the shoreline itself has changed. Gulfport's waterfront once provided an easy foothold into the region when travel across Florida's wilderness daunted all but the most intrepid settlers. The Pinellas peninsula tended towards an impermanent tidal zone than a solid-footed area in which to put down roots. At the southern tip of Pinellas County, Gulfport's waterfront welcomed its first weary boaters escaping the clutches of the Union during the Civil War – the town's founders were blockade runners out of Key West, but when Union troops claimed Fort Taylor, the blockade runners fled to the north, where the rest of Florida remained under Confederate control.

The town's first family earned its living from the waters surrounding Gulfport's beach, back when St. Pete Beach didn't exist. Instead, the first Gulfportians looked out over a tidal mud flat that ran the length of the town, from the site of present-day Pasadena Yacht and Country Club to today's Gulfport/St. Petersburg border.

Back when locals looked out over the Long Key sandbar and not St. Pete Beach, the mud flats came as far north as the site of the present-day Peninsula Inn. The Gulf yielded mullet, kingfish, shark, devilfish, grouper, amberjack, trout, snapper, bass, oysters, stone crab, scallops, coquina and clams. Gulfport's first beach was a stepping-off point for survival; only later did locals see it as a way to draw people to the small town by the sea.

The first recorded attempt to capitalize on the water? A hotel. In *Gulfport: A Definitive History*, Lynne Brown describes the Waldorf, a hotel overlooking Boca Ciega Bay that "probably stood near the foot of York Street."

Developer, venture capitalist, and primary Gulfport landowner Hamilton Disston brought in lumber from the panhandle to build the Waldorf, which opened on Christmas Eve, 1884. It was south Pinellas' first hotel.

The luxury hotel's marketing included advertising in UK and England. While the hotel enjoyed a well-booked year, by the end of the decade, the railroad bypassed Gulfport and the Waldorf closed its doors.

By then, other commerce had started to spread roots across Gulfport's mucky shores. In the mid-1880s, newspaperman Will McPherson described Gulfport – then, Disston City – in his newspaper, the *Seabreeze*:

This rapidly growing town... is beautifully situated on the west side of Point Pinellas, on Boca Ciega Bay, about three miles from and in full view of Tampa Bay and two miles from the Gulf, from which the bay is there separated by Long Key. It contains three stores, a good hotel, a large boarding house, P.O., and the Sea Breeze printing office; also a fish canning factory in embryo, and a neat schoolhouse.



Henry Hibbs, a North Carolinian who brought his Tampa fish business to St. Petersburg in 1889, helped usher

in the era of Gulfport's fishing village. His fish house, located by the St. Petersburg Pier, was not the only place the Hibbs Fish Company operated: Hibbs fishermen also brought their catches in to the Gulfport Pier.

While most locals fished, either for a paycheck or subsistence, not everyone needed a boat. Here, Gulfport's beach comes into play, as mullet fishermen would use seine nets to haul mullet onto the beach. The tradition of mullet fishing continues in the 21st century, although the means have changed.

Frank Davis arrived in Gulfport in the early 1900s and set to work

convincing the town it needed a trolley that would run from St. Petersburg to Boca Ciega Bay, where boats could carry people from the mainland to Pass-a-Grille.

Davis chose Gulfport after a survey of the coast of Pinellas Point, and the boatman who went with him on this survey was a man named Walt Williams. Williams, who worked for Joshua White, a Gulfport family, helped Davis realize Gulfport's suitability for such a transfer point.

"With Walt Williams guidance," Brown wrote, "Davis and his Philadelphia backers found that the most suitable location was a site just west of the present settlement of Disston City."

A 700-foot pier stretching into Boca Ciega Bay would afford the depth

needed for boats to service Gulfport's soon-to-be-bourgeoning tourist trade. However, Davis believed Gulfport's waterfront needed to



be filled because, as Brown wrote, "the land at that point was not terribly attractive, for there was a long stretch of low-lying mud flat extending from the water's edge northward for some distance." The mudflat reached the doors of the building that today houses the Peninsula Inn.

At the same time, William Chase had plans to turn Disston City into a retirement paradise for Union veterans. Promotional literature for Gulfport – now known as Veteran City – promised a luxurious waterfront boasting sea walls, public parks, and tropical foliage. The marketing neglected to mention the reality: A tidal mudflat.

Gulfport's waterfront started further north than today, and the trolley line ended between today's 27th and 28th Avenues along Beach (then Davis) Boulevard. From there, passengers delicately stepped through the mud flats to shallow-draft boats that would tender them to the larger boats waiting in deeper water. By 1906, the first of three Casinos stood at the southern edge of the mud flat and the northern edge of Boca Ciega Bay proper, and the trolley line extended to this Casino.

In addition to the Casino, a series of piers were built at the

southernmost end of 54th street beginning in 1907.

The town's first mayor, Elmer W. Wintersgill, built a "private wooden pier with corrugated metal-covered slips" ostensibly



intended for relaxation and enjoyment. However, their main purpose was channelling the activities of locals around the Casino, effectively linking Saint Petersburg and Tampa (then the county seat) to the beaches and Pass-a-Grille. Goods, mail, and travelers shuttled back and forth between the coastal region and around the Bay, stopping in Gulfport to disembark from one mode of transport only to board another. The Hibbs Fish Company pier, at the foot of 52nd Street, funded the local economy as well. Fishermen delivered their catch before transporting it to Saint Petersburg on "run boats" and, later, on refrigerated trucks. The pier was replaced in 1918 and then destroyed in the same 1921 hurricane that destroyed the second Casino. Another pier, a WPA project constructed from 1933 to 1934, replaced the second one at the same 54th Street location. It was later removed to make room for its current incarnation, built in the early 1980s.

Inside the Casino, an ice cream parlor, soda fountain, and boat ticket window marked Gulfport's first foray into non-aquaculture waterfront commerce. In 1912, Alex Cusson opened a grocery on Beach and 30th, which was the trolley's final stop before reaching the Casino. Around this time, the Boca Ciega Yacht Club boasted filled slips. The ferries made multiple passages between Gulfport and Pass-a-Grille. A local paper described Gulfport as a "hustling little city" and a "progressive little place." Brown wrote of so much construction in town that developers couldn't find workers fast enough. Land promoter Herman Wendell, who came to Gulfport from Ocean City, New Jersey, drafted a \$60,000 plan for a sea wall that would add 55 acres to the waterfront. The proposed sea wall would be 3,000 feet long.

The sea wall would create 41 lots, 31 of which sold almost immediately. Davis' company still owned 400 feet of waterfront. In early 1914, a storm wiped out the wooden forms of the sea wall – prior to its completion. Redesigns of the sea wall commenced.

Frank Davenport built the Bay View Hotel in 1914. The town began work on a public dock in 1915 and proposed relocating the ferry docks to this new pier at the end of Grant Street (today known as 54th Street South). The Casino had faded in popularity. In 1921, a hurricane felled the Casino, but a second Casino opened in late 1924.

“Remembered as ‘a flimsy affair built on stilts over marshy land,’ the second casino enjoyed the same popularity as the first one for dances and ‘merry-making’ on the ‘swaying floor’ that dancers found so amusing and, continuing in the old tradition, it provided a departure point for beach excursions,” Brown wrote.

In 1926, the Gulfport Chamber of Commerce came into existence. The Chamber launched a “**See Gulfport First**” campaign and president Brent Rodd outlined the chamber’s mission as expanding the town as a home, resort and seaport. The Chamber met its \$12,000 fundraising goal and raised an additional \$8000.

On the heels of the chamber’s success, 20 local real estate professionals formed the Gulfport Realty Board. For its first project, the



board promised new benches and sun shelters, although after protracted debate upon the color of the benches, the Chamber agreed to install the benches, which would be orange.

Real estate sales for one week of March, 1926, totaled \$175,000. In sharp contrast with the rest of the Sunshine State, Gulfport doubled the number of building permits it issued in the first half of 1926 (as compared to 1925), although they sharply declined by late summer.

With the chamber promoting Gulfport as a year-round destination, the Boca Ciega Inn announced plans to remain open all year. The chamber bought advertising for the Boca Ciega Inn, calling it “The coolest spot in Florida.”

The chamber also encouraged the town to sue the Central Fish Company over its request to build a new waterfront fish house. The Chamber cited uncertainty over who owned the land. The law said riparian rights extended to the mean high water line, but Gulfportians



tended to use the land out much further into the bay.

In 1928, Gulfport wanted to build a beach but had to first gain

ownership of private property. To do this, the town sued to condemn the property held by Standard Fisheries Company, the Hibbs Fish Company, Nathan and Claude McKinney and Leandra and Ethel White. The condemnation suit sought Water Lots 4, 5, and 6. These lots totaled 500 feet of shoreline and riparian rights. The approximated value was \$100,000. Local real estate agents spoke on behalf of the town. The defendants asked for \$120,000, and witnesses valued the land at \$200 a foot. The jury awarded \$55,000.

Gulfport demolished the fish houses and used the lumber to build a boardwalk from the shore to the Casino. This allowed passengers to reach the boats without entering the building.

After the crash, Gulfport accepted FERA funds from the WPA. These funds built the third (and present) Casino and the pier. Gulfport faced bankruptcy, but the fish trade remained strong – just east of the downtown. At the onset of World War Two, Clam Bayou – which then encompassed not only its existing footprint but the area that today includes the Gulfport Municipal Marina – shipped over five million pounds of seafood every year.

30% of Gulfport lies underwater, which figures heavily into how Gulfport developed. Gulfport's borders clearly define the waterfront district. The city is bookended by 49th Street in the east, which runs north and south, and 64th Street in the west, also running from north to south. According to the United States Census Bureau, the city has a total area of 3.8 square miles (9.8 km²), of which 2.8 square miles (7.3 km²) is land and 1.0 square mile (2.6 km²) is water. One coastal area in particular testifies to the many historical faces of Gulfport: Osgood Point. Every morning the sun rises over Osgood Point at the southern end of 49th street, on the eastern border of the waterfront near Clam Bayou.

“The bayou has been an environmental habitat since the first settler came to Bonifacio, which was the name of the “fishing town” before becoming Gulfport. Clam Bayou is and was home to many clams, oysters, fiddler crabs, birds, manatees, and various fish. Clam Bayou has also been known as Osgood Point, where ships and boats used to be created for people to enjoy the waters of Boca Ciega Bay and the surrounding areas in the early to mid 1900’s.”

Part of this land was once reportedly owned by gangster Al Capone. Local rumors assert that in 1926, St. Petersburg became a hide-out for Al Capone and “other references to Al Capone come in connection to the hotel of the Jungle Country Club,” just north of Gulfport, “which had its own radio station and airport. According to legend, Capone was part owner in the Jungle Prada nightclub in the Jungle Prada Shopping Complex built in 1923/24.”

During Prohibition, an underground tunnel for bootleggers was also allegedly constructed from the bay to Jungle Prada.

“Originally the small peninsula extending into Clam Bayou was known as Sea Grape Point. Settlers caught fish and crabs there and harvested the sea grapes in the early fall to make jelly. During the Prohibition era, it was a popular drop-off site for liquor illegally brought in from Cuba, the bottles being thrown overboard in burlap sacks for locals to collect and sell (or drink).” As with many anecdotal tales of this kind, various versions serve to either dispel the mythos or regale the bravado of times gone by.

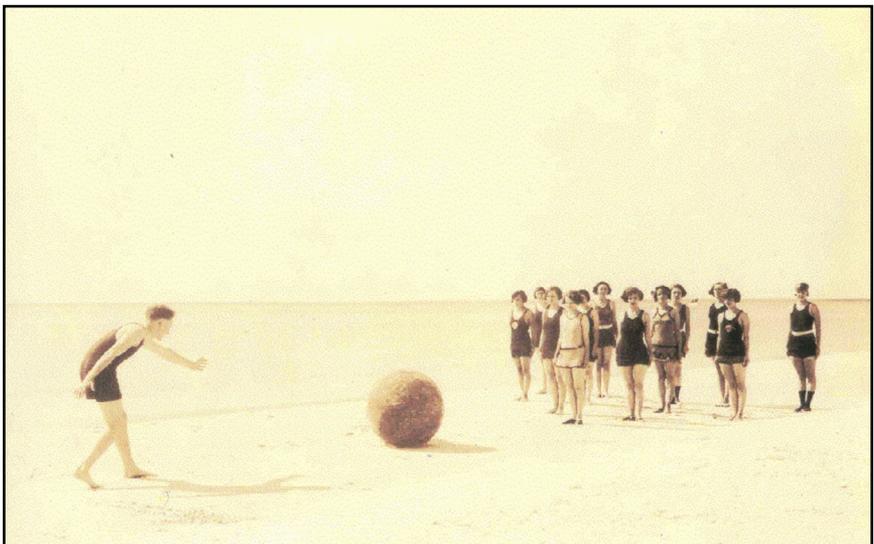
Certainly, there was an ongoing boat-building concern at Clam Bayou after its initial use as a fertile region for food, as attested by the designation “Osgood Point”. Apparently that name reflects its use as the site of the Osgood Marine Works, begun by the descendants of New Englander

George Osgood. “[He] left New Hampshire in the late 1800s to work for the United Fruit Co. on Roatan, an island



off Honduras. In 1918, his son Hammond T. Osgood brought his family to Florida. Both born in Spanish Honduras, Orion Osgood was then about 10 and his brother Neil just 4 when they arrived in Tampa.” In 1939, the business moved to the shores of Clam Bayou at 3108 Miriam St. They dredged out the basin and channel at a cost of about \$5,000, creating enough land to support a workshop and boat slips for rental. A few years later, the Coast Guard building went up to the south of the Osgood Works. They built wooden boats of all sorts — outboards, rowboats, sailboats — before turning in later years to fiberglass construction. Most of the lumber came from Florida — swamp cypress, juniper, white cedar, yellow pine, and oak — along with Philippine and Honduran mahogany and Douglas fir from the west coast, all shipped here by railway. The business burned down in March 1956, destroying the manufacturing shop, a dozen boats being repaired, and several more under construction. It was rebuilt through the help of the city government and countless citizens, who raised \$4,502 through auctions, fundraisers and contributions to aid in a new start.

“We thank the Good Lord for permitting us to live in a city where all practice service above self,” Neil Osgood said. In 1961 they built the biggest boat ever made in Gulfport, the six-ton, 52-foot fishing vessel Pine Key. Of all the boats that the Osgoods built, the Pine Key was the one of which they were most proud. It had a 16-foot beam with a 4-foot draft and was made of the best wood for boats, sappy pine (from Pine Key) for the keel, bow stem, and frames and Honduras mahogany for the planking. The Osgood children (Orion’s son, Brian and Neil’s three

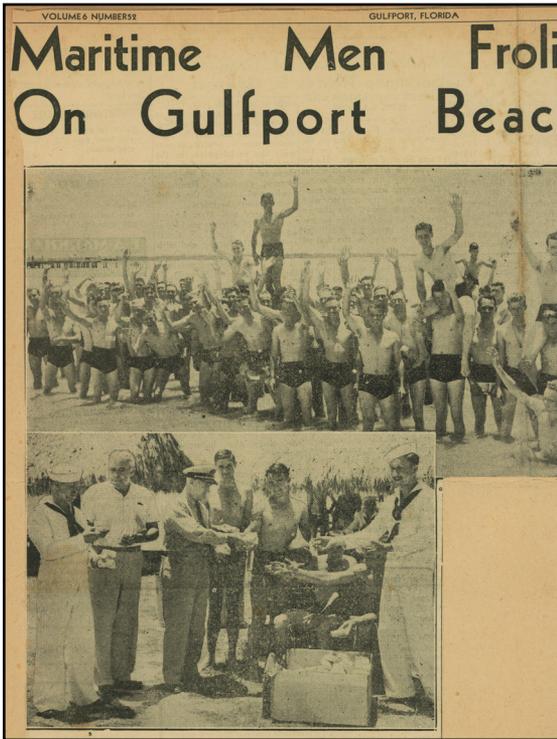


sons, Carl, Sandy, and Larry) grew up in the boat business, cleaning wood shavings, scrubbing barnacles, and painting the bottoms of many boats. The boys found careers with boats as well: Carl in refinishing yachts, Sandy as a licensed captain of a 40-foot sports fishing boat, Larry in the commercial fishing



business, and Brian working with his dad. Neil died in 1984 and Orion in 1987. The business closed for good in 1978 when its 36-year-old \$200 monthly lease expired and was offered for renewal at \$1500 a month, which the Osgoods rejected.

In time, Osgood Point degenerated into an eroding, garbage-covered strip of land, barren and raw, half-buried in old refrigerators, chunks of concrete, and beer bottles. The city began looking for solutions to the eyesore, and in 1980 a Committee for the Review of the Development of Osgood Point formed to recommend productive uses for the area. A \$132,000 federal grant paved the road out to the point and installed water and sewer lines. In 1982, the city heard proposals for a \$9 million project involving a nautical museum, two restaurants, several marine-oriented businesses, and parking for 400 cars in a wooden boardwalk-bordered village, resembling John's Pass Village in Madeira Beach. A group of residents worried about traffic, billboards, hours of operation, and environmental concerns contested the plan, and it was abandoned. In 1989 another idea surfaced, this time for passive park land; most residents supported it, recognizing that the last piece of "old Gulfport" needed to be preserved. Work began to clean the area. Nuisance vegetation was ripped up, seagrapes were replanted, and the land started to come back to life. In 1994, construction began on the restoration project, in which the city teamed with Surface Water Improvement and Management of the DEP and Southwest Florida Water Management District to improve habitats and public access. After a fight over landscaping with artificial sand dunes and closing the tip of the Point to vehicular traffic, the project finally opened in September 1995 with six acres of wetlands, more than 30,000 new native plants, and 4,000 linear feet of walking trails and boardwalks.



Claudette Renney Dean, a descendant of Gulfport's first settlers, wrote during the Point's worst times: "Sea Grape Point today is only a barren peninsula extending into Clam Bayou. The sea grapes are gone, the beauty of the bay broken by landfills and condos. But even today, if you sit on the point, close your eyes, and let the sweet sea breeze flow through your body, remembering the stories of old and of times gone by – it doesn't seem like so long ago at all."

Before the United States entered World War II, most Floridians lived north of Gainesville. During the war, however, many men trained on Florida beaches and became enchanted with the swaying palms, abundant sea life, and the sparkling green water. This dream, along with the invention of air conditioning and mosquito control, drew veterans and their families to Florida in droves. Gulfport, as with the rest of Florida, experienced a population boom, and the small city by the sea found itself in the midst of post-war construction. A 1954 editorial in the *St. Petersburg Times* pled with the county commission to plan its fill projects more carefully; the article specifically referred to Gulfport and consumer demand for more waterfront property to sell.

This demand for land would ultimately doom commerce along the beach as Gulfport knew it, because the dredge and fill approach to real estate didn't stop with the Gateway to the Gulf. As developers used fill to turn Long Key into St. Pete Beach and other developers built an island on the sand – Tierra Verde – Gulfport's waterfront became known as a "bay beach", a pejorative suggesting a lesser beach. The dredging of Boca Ciega Bay to create fill and allow for boat egress altered the bay bottom

topography, and in the 1950s biologists declared Boca Ciega Bay “dead” and reported a paucity of sea grass and life forms. Gulfport’s waterfront lost its sparkle when compared with St. Pete Beach, and as the waterfront lost business, the business of the waterfront had to change. While tourism faltered – Gulfport had few lodging opportunities, especially when compared with St. Pete Beach — aquaculture did not. Fishermen, ever more numerous, found ways to stay afloat financially. On occasion, this meant saving “square grouper” from certain death on the floor of the Gulf. More than one Gulfportian will admit to trading his catch for cash, and at least one Gulfportian has spent time in the state prison for catching square grouper.

As mullet fishing laws changed and the DEA tightened patrols, Gulfport’s waterfront evolved again – this time, to one filled with businesses attempting to stay open. The Swamp Club, the “Entertainment of the Universe” offered local music in the 1980s, and the Sand Dollar (*name?*) (currently Neptune Grill) briefly offered topless dancers to entice men through the doors. The sales figures for that short-lived foray into adult entertainment are not known, although anecdotal history suggest Gulfport city council made a thorough investigation of the Sand Dollar’s business model before voting to shutter the topless club. With a struggling economy, rents stayed low as other areas of the county – especially waterfront or water-approximate – skyrocketed. Artists seeking inexpensive shelter moved to town and found they could pay their rent and make art and still feed themselves. In the 1990s, Gulfport held its first Art Walk, where local artists could showcase their wares. People came from other cities to see the art, and, within a decade, Gulfport’s waterfront district replaced its water appeal with art appeal. The waterfront district became known as the “Art Village”, populated by artists and galleries.

In the early part of the new millennium, property values skyrocketed. Some Gulfport properties sold three times in



two years, doubling in value each time. Artists, attracted by low rents, found Gulfport less affordable. The Art Village saw less art, as did the ArtWalk. Restaurants replaced galleries, although some buildings stayed shuttered altogether. The waterfront's evolution reflects the virtues of this village-sized city within the context of a busy Tampa Bay metropole. What was once an economic spine for the fishing and boat-building industries became first the economic backbone of tourism and, later, the foundations of a town rooted in history. The metaphor of a constantly changing seaside can hardly be ignored as the community successfully adapts to the tidal shifts that mark the new millennium.

In an article published by the Saint Petersburg Times in 2001, Amy Wimmer supports the notion that the city of Gulfport frequently reinvents itself. Longtime members of the community, writes Wimmer, witnessed "Beach Boulevard evolve from the town's center to a ghost town when Winn-Dixie was built on Gulfport Boulevard. Now the street leading to the Gulfport Casino is again the city's centerpiece, dubbed the 'Waterfront Business District,' and Gulfport's redevelopment area features several art shops, bars and restaurants." Gulfport's most substantive defining feature has been, paradoxically, to resist definition, with the perhaps unintended consequence being that no single person or group of people can claim a mandate for the future of either the city or the waterfront. What some might call the transient nature of the waterfront's purpose has created a sense of community that binds all of Gulfport's residents together in the continuing creation of a city in which to live, work, and play.

At the south end of 58th Street, perpendicular to Shore Drive and just west of the Casino, the waterfront turns northwest with the sweep of Boca Ciega Bay. The same year that saw the construction of the second casino also bore witness to the land boom that began in earnest in 1924. That was the year that Jack Taylor came to Gulfport. Described by some as a "glamorous, Gatsby-like figure in Brooks Brothers knickerbockers," his reputation remains uncertain, unlike his clearly documented role in the development of the land west of 58th Street known as Pasadena

Estates. The speculation that marked the times and preceded the Great Depression was in full swing throughout Florida and Gulfport was no exception.

As the coast of Gulfport turns northwest toward the setting sun, the shore of what



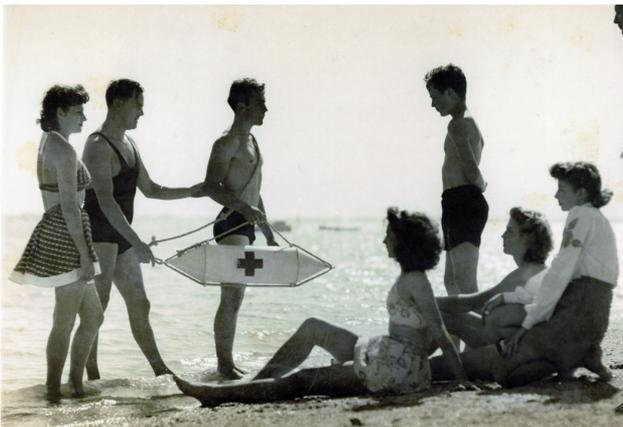
was initially named Pasadena Estates by Jack Taylor expands into a series of peninsulas that house many of Gulfport's residents still. The property sale of the lands west of Gulfport, including the Pasadena Golf Course, created livable space that enhanced the functionality and leisure of Gulfport's other two waterfront zones: the bayou and the beach. The functional work space of Clam Bayou and the sunny beaches are balanced by the surrounding pier and Casino, which both give way to the residential area of South Pasadena. The same year that Taylor took an option on all land west of 58th street, 1925, he built the Rolyat Hotel [now Stetson Law School]. By 1928 the planning board had voted to adjust the streets of Gulfport so that they conformed to those in Saint Petersburg. Those years were a time of major upheaval. The '20s saw both construction from the ground up and destruction from two hurricanes. The 1926 opening of the Rolyat also bore witness to the duel of America's two most famous golders of the time: Walter Hagen and Bobby Jones. By 1928 the Bayou, the Casino, and Pasadena Estates were defined entities. The '30s saw Clam Bayou dredged, the third Casino built, and woods and forests of the land west of 58th street cleared for housing. "By summer 1924, 25 new houses were under construction, mostly bungalows of the 'Spanish type,' or small stucco-coated frame houses." However, the landmarks that define the history of Gulfport do not stop at the water's edge. There is more to Gulfport than the waterfront. And though many feel that the community was cut out



of development opportunities by the decision not to extend the railroad from St. Pete or the building of the causeway to Pass-a-Grille, those changes have helped form the ties that bind within Gulfport and insulate the community in such a way as to engender the fabric of community that has bound its residents together.

Change has been the touchstone of this community. In addition to the “unbelievable luxury” of the 1884 Waldorf Hotel, the showplace of the waterfront by 1912 was the Boca Ciega Inn at the foot of 54th street. Both came and went with the tide of time. Osgood Point and Clam Bayou are within site of the Marina, harkening back to the boat-building past of the eastern section of the waterfront, as well as the Coast Guard Auxiliary and the Retired Coast Guard Officers’ Club. The Gulfport Yacht Club and the Boca Ciega Yacht Club also speak to the history of this small boating and fishing community. Most today are historical footnotes. The economic driver of Gulfport is centered along Gulfport’s busiest thoroughfare. That too changed names, from Davis to Beach Drive.

Through all of the changes, however, the beat of the heart of Gulfport has remained steady. The tides have created a rhythm. The rhythm has created a sense of community. And the community has defined itself by the rhythm of change that the times have defined. The waterfront of Gulfport is not static and neither is its community. It shares the ebb and flow of the tides and is remade with the passing of years.



About Sand Dollars: Gulfport's Beach & Its Economy

This exhibit marks the first new exhibit at the Gulfport History Museum/ The Gulfport Historical Society created and presented the exhibit and runs the museum with the gracious assistance of the City of Gulfport. From this point forward, the Gulfport Historical Society will rotate exhibits and the museum collection throughout the year.

About the Gulfport Historical Society

The Gulfport Historical Society is a 501c3 whose reach extends beyond the walls of the Gulfport History Museum. Starting tonight, the museum will offer programming that celebrates Gulfport's unique history. Current programs include monthly porch parties and Gulfport History Month, but new programs include speaker series, walking tours, "City as Museum" programs, and preservation work.

Our vision

Gulfport's history offers our community a legacy found nowhere else in the world. The Society believes a town that rises above all other small towns does so by celebrating its individuality and sense of place. To that end, the Gulfport Historical Society will create programs and exhibits that will give locals a sense of home and visitors an experience they will not find anywhere else. Please join us as we celebrate our past with an eye to the future.

How you can help

Support the Gulfport Historical Society in one of many ways:

- Annual, family or lifetime membership
- One-time or monthly donations
- Porch party sponsorship
- Program advertising
- Calendar sponsorship
- Bequests
- Volunteerism

Our Mission

The Gulfport Historical Society preserves and celebrates Gulfport culture and history through exhibits and programs that educate and inspire the community and visiting public.

