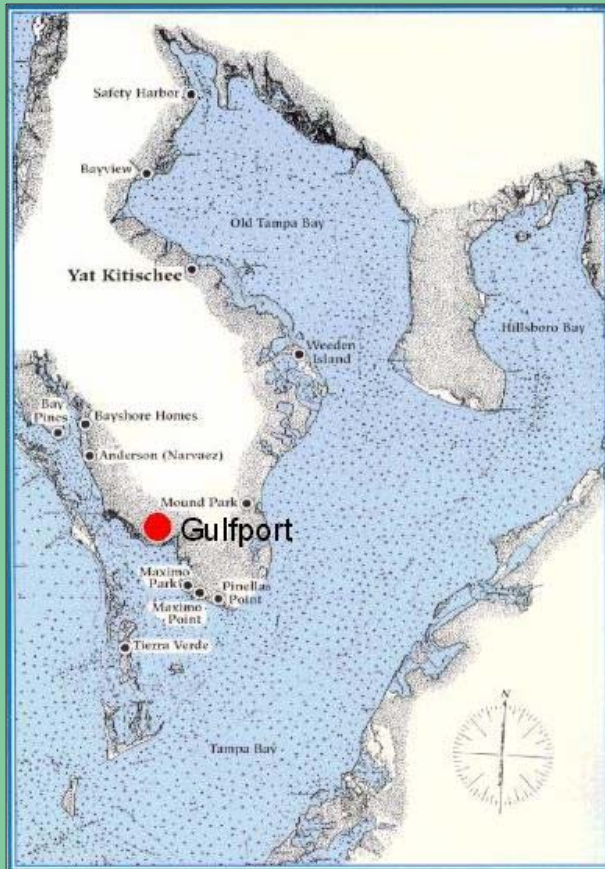


# City of Gulfport Rediscovering Our Past



*Florida has a rich and fascinating cultural heritage; Gulfport shares that heritage. Beneath the paths we travel each day lie clues to the people who lived here long ago. Archaeology helps to remind us that a study of the past sharpens our sense of the present.*

**Message from the Mayor**

As we enter the start of a new millennium, this is an appropriate time to reflect on our cultural past. Some 12,000 years ago, the Gulfport area was inhabited by natives referred to as hunters and gatherers. The area was impacted by Spanish and British expeditions in the 16th and 17th centuries. The first settlers established homes in heavily wooded areas along the Gulf of Mexico Bay. We have been influenced by visionaries such as the early 19th century Captain John Chase. After World War II, Gulfport experienced rapid construction of residential and commercial structures. The current generation only represents a small period of our rich and fascinating cultural heritage.



Our city continues to change based on the needs and desires of our citizens. As we continue to make improvements to our infrastructure, we are preserving our rich and fascinating cultural heritage. I believe that Gulfport has a bright and successful future based on the enthusiasm that exists today in our community.

I would like to recognize the members of Gulfport City Council for their service to our city: Vice-Mayor John E. "Ted" Phillips and Councilmembers Jack B. Olsen, Lynne Brown and Larry Cooper.

Michael J. Yakes, Mayor  
City of Gulfport

**Message from the Chairman**

I would like to encourage you to study the rich history of our community. There is much to learn from the time period of our native people, the influences of the Spanish and British colonists and our early settlers. As technological changes continue to affect our lives, our cultural past should not be forgotten.

Gulfport City Council established the Historic Preservation Committee in 1994 for the purpose of protecting and preserving archaeological resources. The committee was created by the Florida State Legislature in 1997 by having expertise in archaeology and land use planning.



I would like to recognize the members of the committee for their contribution to this publication: Mary Atkinson, Jo Arras, Elizabeth Neily and Kenneth Stanton. Also, thank you to the Planning and Development Supervisor.

Emmett Walsh, Chairman  
Historic Preservation Committee

## What Is Archaeology?

Archaeology is the study of past cultural behavior, from the beginnings of the human species to events that happened yesterday, through the material remains, or *artifacts*, that people leave behind. By carefully applying scientific techniques in excavation and analysis of their findings, archaeologists attempt to reconstruct past lifeways and understand why different customs developed and evolved.

Archaeologists also hope to gain a better understanding of the native Floridians as a people. To do this, they try to assemble clues that help answer questions about their religious beliefs, political systems and family structures. Unfortunately, games, jokes, songs, and dances do not preserve in the ground. To help flesh out the details of prehistoric life, archaeologists use historical documents that describe native cultures at the time of Spanish contact and *ethnographies* of contemporary traditional societies in places like Africa, Australia and South America. These provide insights into the kinds of social behaviors that might have been practiced in the past by people possessing similar levels of economic and political development.



Field Archaeologist

## Why Study the Past?

Throughout Florida, native people have had to solve everyday problems that confront people everywhere - the necessities of obtaining food and shelter, protection from the elements, and learning to coexist with family members and neighbors. Because areas were occupied for over 1000 years, people also had to respond to long-term problems such as increases in population, the depletion of resources and climatic change. Through archaeology, we come to understand that there are many different ways of dealing with these problems and we gain an appreciation for the variety of customs, beliefs and lifestyles that are present within the human species.

## What Is Culture?

Culture is the set of ideas, beliefs, customs and behaviors that are shared by a people living in a specific place and time. Human beings are born with the capacity for creative thought and communication using symbols. But we are not born with culture - we acquire it from our parents and our social peers. Thus, another important component of culture is that it is transmitted from one generation to the next through a complex learning process. Other species possess some of the behaviors that we associate with culture, such as the ability to use simple tools, to communicate with one another, and some forms of social behavior. But none have developed these to the extent that human beings have. The sophisticated development of cultural behavior is our unique adaptation.



## The Limitations of Archaeology

One part of native life that is difficult to reconstruct from archaeological evidence is the way that people perceived their world and their place in it - in other words, their belief systems. In traditional societies, many aspects of daily life are invested with a spiritual character. To the extent that these spiritual beliefs were manifested in behaviors that left behind material remains that can be interpreted accurately, archaeologists can attempt to reconstruct them. But we will never be completely successful. That is why it is important to work with and learn as much as we can from traditional people living today, so that we can bring their perspectives to bear on understanding the intricacies of past cultures.



## Native American Culture

The native people who lived in what is now Gulfport and Pinellas County were associated with a prehistoric culture known as Manasota. This culture extended geographically from present day Sarasota County north to Tampa Bay. The Manasota culture evolved from the earlier **Archaic** cultures of mobile hunters and gatherers that began settling permanently along the West Coast of Florida around 3000-4000 B.C. These Archaic peoples were themselves descendants of Florida's first inhabitants, known to archaeologists as **Paleo-Indians**, who arrived here 12-14,000 years ago.



Unlike their Paleo-Indian and Archaic ancestors, the people of the Manasota culture were fully adapted to a coastal environment, and their archaeological sites contain artifacts and other features that reflect this adaptation. Manasota settlements are located in *hammocks* near bays and estuaries providing access to fish and shellfish, as well as terrestrial plants and animals in the nearby pine flatwoods and in freshwater streams and ponds.

Each settlement appears to have contained a few related families. When people died, they were buried near their home or in cemeteries located near the settlement. The absence of grave goods or any indication of differential treatment in death suggests that Manasota society was relatively egalitarian. Leadership in the community was probably based on individual ability and was acquired rather than inherited. Villages in a region may have been integrated through marriage or trade networks.



By approximately 200 A.D., Manasota people adopted some of the religious, ceremonial and mortuary practices that were being practiced by neighboring cultures to the north. Archaeologists call this set of shared customs **Weeden Island** after the type site in St. Petersburg where their archaeological manifestations were first identified. There is some confusion about what Weeden Island is, or was, and not even archaeologists can agree on every detail. Basically, Weeden Island consisted of a set of religious beliefs and associated rituals that helped people make sense of their world. Just as today people of different cultures sometimes share a common religion such as Hinduism or Catholicism, prehistoric peoples in north and west-central Florida adopted the

religious and ceremonial practices of Weeden Island while retaining their local traditions of subsistence, family structure, technology and social organization. The primary archaeological manifestation of this new ceremonialism was the use of sand burial *mounds* and the placement of ornately decorated pottery with the dead.

Around A.D. 900, another change took place - the emergence of the final prehistoric culture in the Tampa Bay area - Safety Harbor. This time the source of influence was from much farther away - the Mississippi Bottoms of the American Midwest. Here, new political and ceremonial practices developed in response to increased population and the need to develop management measures to safeguard against famine and warfare. Safety Harbor society was highly stratified, with a noble class, warriors, slaves and peasants. Politics and religion were closely related, and political rulers were often believed to be gods who demanded respect and tribute in return for ensuring peace and prosperity.

A hierarchy of site types reflects the unequal status of people within Safety Harbor society. Large ceremonial centers with flat-topped *temple mounds* were home to *caciques*, or supreme rulers, whose domains encompassed several smaller towns and hamlets. One of these temple towns, Tocobaga, was located at Phillipi Park near the modern town of Safety Harbor. Lesser rulers resided in smaller towns and collected tribute from the still smaller villages and hamlets that dotted the landscape. The local rulers kept some of this tribute, and the rest was passed on to the supreme cacique. The territory of Tocobaga (part of which is depicted on the map on the front cover) included the temple towns at Pinellas Point, Maximo Point, and the Anderson site on Boca Ciega Bay.



## Early Settlement

- **First Spanish Colonial Period (1513-1763)**

During the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the Tampa Bay area was visited by a number of Spanish expeditions. The first of many official expeditions in Florida started in the Tampa Bay area and was conducted by Pánfilo de Narváez in 1527-28. The next was that of Governor Hernándo de Soto which used Tampa Bay as its landing site. Both expeditions eventually failed as they proceeded to the north with few survivors.

In October of 1565, Governor Pedro Menéndez established Jesuit Missions along the coast of Florida, including the mission of Carlos at Charlotte Harbor and the mission of Tocobaga at Tampa Bay. In March of 1567 Menéndez sailed into the Bay of Tocobaga (now Old Tampa Bay) with a group of about 30 soldiers, Captain Martinez de Coz, and Fray Rogel. The mission was established at the village of the cacique of Tocobaga and consisted of 24 houses. The failure of the Jesuit mission at Tocobaga was the last attempt by the Spanish to colonize the Tampa Bay region.

- **British Period (1763-1783)**

With the Treaty of Paris in 1763, Spain agreed to cede Florida to England. The land that England received included the Florida peninsula and a contiguous strip stretching west to the Mississippi River. The English divided this territory into two parts, east and west, due to a decision that such a vast domain could not be administered effectively from one capital. The peninsula was included in the royal province of East Florida, with its capital at St. Augustine. Pensacola was West Florida's administrative center. The British made no effort to settle the central Gulf Coast during their brief control of Florida in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and ceded Florida back to Spain in 1783.

- **Second Spanish Colonial Period (1783-1819)**

During the Second Spanish period, a trading post was established on the eastern shore of Tampa Bay by Captain Vicente Folch y Juan. In 1793 a small garrison of soldiers and merchants manned this post for less than one year. Eighteenth century reports by the Spanish and British coastal mapping expeditions mention encounters in the Tampa Bay area with Indians but it is not clear whether they were Seminole or "Spanish Indians" (Calusa, Tocobaga, or Muscogulge Indians). It is possible that small populations of both groups lived in the region at this time.

During the eighteenth century Cuban fishermen also established seasonal fish camps or ranchos along the coast. These fishermen were engaged in catching mullet and drying them for sale in the Havana markets. By the early nineteenth century, the Spanish Indians were often employed as workers in these fish ranchos, hence the origin of their name in Anglo-American documents.

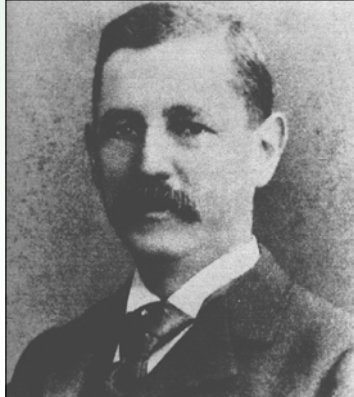
- **Territorial to Civil War Period (1819-1865)**

The 1840 U.S. Census of Hillsborough County shows only two residents living in what is now Pinellas County, Antonio Maximo Hernández and Odet Philippe. Hernández operated a fish rancho located on Maximo Point, and Philippe homesteaded 122 acres in Safety Harbor in the late 1830s. By the mid-1840s fisherman John Levick and Joseph Silva were living in the Jungle area on Boca Ciega Bay, and William Papy was living in Papy's Bayou. Captain William Bruce, a native of Maryland and former resident of Key West, relocated his large fish rancho to Cabbage Key in 1835. His first rancho at the mouth of the Manatee River had been shelled and burned by Federal gunboats in 1834. Federal gunboats destroyed the rancho on Cabbage Key in October of 1840.

The Armed Occupation Act of 1842 offered settlers 160 acres of land at no cost, provided they built a house, cleared five acres, planted crops and resided there for five years. This act, plus the end of the Second Seminole War, created a small wave of immigration by Anglo-American pioneers to Central Florida. The Pinellas peninsula, however, increased very little in population during the 1840s. The 1850 U.S. Census indicates that most of the County's residences were engaged in fishing for a livelihood.

- **Reconstruction to Spanish-American War Period (1865-1898)**

Unlike the rest of the South, the post-Civil War era in Florida and the Pinellas peninsula was a period of growth and optimism. During the 1870s, the population steadily increased, and small rural trading centers like Clearwater, Bayview, Anona, and Green Springs acquired post offices and schools. Open range cattle ranching and commercial fishing were still the economic mainstays of the region, but new settlers experimented with new crops, especially citrus. The Pinellas peninsula had two tenuous communication routes with the outside world: the Old Tampa Road, a rough wagon trail to Tampa, and the small coastal schooners that plied the Gulf between Key West and Cedar Key. Havana and Key West were the principal markets for local produce.



Hamilton Disston

The events of the 1880s were a watershed in the development of Gulfport as well as Pinellas County. The first settlers of Gulfport were Captain James Barnett and his wife Rebecca. They built a house near the shoreline in 1867. Other notable settlers included Joe Torres and William Bonafacio Miranda. Gulfport was originally named Bonafacio until the Disston Land Purchases in 1881. Hamilton Disston purchased approximately 150,000 acres of land in southern Pinellas County and platted 25 square miles named Disston City. This new city was to have a population of 50,000 persons and included the 26 room hotel named The Waldorf. The waterfront area of present-day Gulfport was part of the Disston City development. In 1886, the population of Disston City was 150 persons.

Disston needed a railroad into the Pinellas peninsula, and Peter Demens and his proposed Orange Belt Railroad was his only chance of achieving this goal. In 1888, the completion of the Orange Belt Railroad gave rail service to St. Petersburg but did not include Disston City. This turn of events made Disston City only accessible by water, with service being provided by the steamship named Mary Disston. In 1892, the Mary Disston caught fire at the dock and was set adrift to sink out in the bay. With limited access and few visitors, Disston City entered into a period of decline and the population also decreased.

- **Spanish-American War to County Formation Period (1898-1912)**

The Spanish American War had little economic impact on Pinellas County. However, a large V-shaped island at its southern terminus did figure prominently in the nation's coastal defense system. Mullet Key, and Egmont Key, its sister key to the south, had long been regarded as vital to the protection of Egmont Channel, which provided access to Tampa Bay and the port facilities of Tampa. The advent of the Spanish-American War in 1898 led to the construction of coastal fortifications at both Mullet and Egmont keys. The Mullet Key military reservation was named Ft. DeSoto after the famous Spanish explorer. The war was short lived, and no shots were fired from Ft. DeSoto.

The Pinellas peninsula increased dramatically in population during the early 1900s from 2,572 in 1900 to 8,057 in 1910. Census data shows that the majority of the increase took place in urban areas. The growth of the peninsula meant a need for county services and road building that was ignored by the courthouse in Tampa. The movement for separation of Pinellas from Hillsborough County began in 1906. The issue went to a public referendum vote in 1911, and voters overwhelmingly approved the creation of a new county for the peninsula. Pinellas County became a legal entity on January 1, 1912.

During the early 1900s, an electric trolley was extended from St. Petersburg to present-day Gulfport. As a result, the area became attractive as a tourist destination, in addition to its status as a fishing village. In 1904, Captain Chase planned a retirement community for Civil War veterans, and Disston City became known as Veteran City. Large plots of land were developed adjacent to the trolley line, and major developments, such as a pier and casino, were constructed. A sawmill named Singlehurst Mill operated in this time period and helped clear the wooded areas of the city as well as producing lumber and related products. Veteran City did not attract the retirees as planned, and by October 12, 1910 a new town was incorporated under the name of Gulfport.

- **World War I to World War II (1913-1945)**

The outbreak of war in Europe in 1914 slowed development in the county, and American entry into World War I in 1917 ended the first boom period in Pinellas. During this period, however, important infrastructure projects were completed that made the post-war boom possible. The Seaboard Air Line Railroad, which provided connections with major cities in Florida, built a new line into the county between 1913 and 1915. Between 1914 and 1917 the county built 75 miles of nine foot wide brick roads that linked the areas main towns. These were the first paved roads in Pinellas. Gulfport had a number of subdivisions platted and developed up to 1917, including the main residential areas that are adjacent to the present-day waterfront area.

The Florida land boom of the 1920s had a dramatic impact on the county. The county as well as the state was described as having a healthful climate and a place to purchase inexpensive land. The population increased from 28,265 in 1920 to 62,149 in 1930. The boom's impact did little to change the rural unincorporated areas of Pinellas. The unincorporated area had a population of 7,533 in 1920 and 5,033 in 1930. The decrease was due to annexation by cities during this decade. Life in rural Pinellas improved in this era, but the basic agricultural pattern of citrus growth and cattle ranching remained the same.

In 1923, Gulfport's population was estimated at 300 persons. The city tripled in population to approximately 1,000 persons by 1928. It was during this period that many of the brick paved roadways were constructed and the Rolyat Hotel (now Stetson University Law School) opened. The end of the land boom marked the beginning of the Great Depression in 1929 and Gulfport entered into another period of decline. A reduced population of 851 persons was estimated in 1930. Toward the end of the Great Depression, "new deal" federal programs were utilized to improve services within Gulfport, such as drainage systems, water service and reconstruction of the casino. By 1940, the population of Gulfport rose to approximately 1,581 persons.

- **World War II to Present (1946-1999)**

The urbanization of the county and the city began after the second world war as the population dramatically increased. In 1950, the county increased in population to 160,000 persons and further increased to over 500,000 persons by 1970. In 1950, the population of the city was 4,750 persons and in 1970 it increased to 9,730 persons. Following the war and up to 1970, changes occurred such as the construction of roadways, churches, schools, parks, city government facilities, commercial establishments, apartment complexes and residential neighborhoods. The mass production era of automobiles and household items also influenced the character of the county and the city. As the national economy slowed down in the 1970s and 1980s, the county and the city followed the trend of recession and urban decline. By the early 1990s, the city began renewal efforts to revitalize areas and re-establish vitality to residential and commercial areas. With a strong economy in the late 1990s, the county and the city continues to slowly change based on present day culture, new technology and national trends. The population of Gulfport in 1999 is estimated to be 12,600 persons with nearly built-out conditions for the area.

## Florida Steamships and the Mary Disston

In the late 19th century, the steamship was key to the development of Florida. For Gulfport to become an important part of Florida's future, Mr. Disston needed a steamship to bring passengers and freight to his new city. The Mary Disston was built in Pittsburgh in 1885 as a riverboat and for a time served in that capacity on the Kissimmee River. Later becoming the critical link between Gulfport and the main rail terminus for the West Coast of Florida in Cedar Key, the Mary Disston was the lifeblood of Hamilton Disston's dream city. The ship was named after Mr. Disston's mother. However, it was also affectionately known as the Dirty Mary due to the dense smoke coming from her smokestacks.

The steamships that served in Florida's waters were similar in appearance to the grand riverboats that operated on the Mississippi River. However, due to the unique environmental conditions found in Florida, our ships were different in a number of important ways. First, to navigate rivers and waterways that were much smaller than the Mississippi, Florida ships needed to be diminutive in comparison. The smaller size also meant the ships were more maneuverable. This was important since most rivers in Florida were relatively narrow and, often, had sharp turns that could not be navigated by larger vessels. Tree branches hanging low over Florida rivers could also spell trouble for the exposed paddlewheels of conventional steamships. To eliminate this danger, ships such as the Mary Disston had enclosed paddlewheels. The paddlewheels were different in their placement as well. Traditional ships had the paddlewheels at the very rear of the ship; steamships in Florida generally followed a design where the wheel was recessed into the body of the ship. Water escaped through doors at the rear of the ship and passed a rudder that extended behind the ship and provided excellent maneuverability. Finally, a shallow draft allowed steamships to navigate Florida's waters and ever-changing sandbars.

What had begun as a dream had grown into a promise, and that promise was on its way to becoming reality when disaster struck in 1892. The Mary Disston caught fire, burned and sank in a moment that transformed Mr. Disston's vision into an uncertain future. The Mary Disston had provided Florida's first regularly scheduled steamship service, and without a reliable link to the outside world the future of Disston's dream had been cast into doubt.



## Preserving the Past

Florida has a rich and fascinating cultural heritage that is at least 12,000 years old. Unfortunately, it has been estimated that within twenty-five years Florida's prehistoric archaeological sites will all be damaged or destroyed. Whether by construction, development or vandalism the impact is the same - the loss of Florida's unique archaeological record. When a site is damaged, large chunks of information are lost forever. Imagine viewing the Mona Lisa with pieces of the canvas missing or reading Moby Dick with every third page torn out. The information can never be replaced because the remarkable cultures that created these sites are gone, and the people left no written records. This is why archaeological sites are referred to as "non-renewable resources". They are the only evidence we have of these people ever having been here. We should all cherish Florida's and Gulfport's archaeological heritage and protect it for future generations as a source of knowledge and inspiration.

### Why Should We Preserve Archaeological Sites?

Archaeologists acknowledge that their science is still young and growing. Methods used for excavation only twenty years ago are considered inadequate today. It is therefore reasonable to assume that today's methods will be improved upon as technology advances. This is why archaeologists like to leave intact a portion of each site they work on for future archaeologists to excavate.

There is another reason to preserve sites. Archaeology is more than just an arcane science or a nostalgic look into the past. Its true worth lies in its ability to develop in us a respect for people and cultures different from our own. Preserving archaeological sites helps preserve a major source of evidence documenting the diversity of cultures that have existed since humans first walked the earth.

### Further Information

***Our Story of Gulfport:*** a historical perspective completed in 1985 in which numerous citizens discuss their knowledge of churches, buildings, service organizations and what makes Gulfport unique.

***Gulfport Historic Buildings Survey:*** a comprehensive survey completed in 1992 identifying over four hundred buildings that contribute to the fabric of the city. Building styles include frame vernacular, bungalow and mediterranean revival.

***Gulfport Archaeological Survey:*** a comprehensive survey completed in 1999 identifying nineteen sensitivity zones, seven archaeological sites and details about the sunken steamship Mary Disston.

***Gulfport Web Site:*** <http://www.ci.gulfport.fl.us>

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