

## **Brief History of Hillsborough County, Florida**

by Rodney Kite-Powell and Elizabeth Laramie Dunham  
Tampa Bay History Center

The county of Hillsborough was created by an act of the Florida Legislature on January 25, 1834. The original, or historic, Hillsborough County covered approximately 14,600 square miles -- all or part of 24 present-day counties (an area larger than 8 states at the time). By comparison, today's Hillsborough County is 1,072 square miles. Its history is as varied and fascinating as any other place in this country. People have lived in this area of West Central Florida for over 11,000 years, and their story is, in effect, our story.

Florida's indigenous people flourished here thousands of years before the first explorers arrived from Europe. The Timucua and the Calusa were two of the largest and most highly-developed groups who controlled much of the peninsula and its population. Different Timucuan people spoke dialects of the same language and held possession of the northern third of Florida, while the Calusa ruled over southwest Florida. The area now known as Hillsborough County was occupied by smaller groups, notably the Tocobaga, Mocoso and Ucita.

Though probably known to Europeans before, Florida was "officially" located by Spaniard Juan Ponce de Leon in March of 1513. He was followed by a long line of adventurers, including Panfilo de Narvaez (April 1528) and Hernando de Soto (May 1539). Archaeological evidence shows that Narvaez began his explorations from Tampa Bay, while debate continues as to de Soto's actual landing place. The first priest to celebrate mass in Florida -- Fray Luis Cancer de Barbastro on June 20, 1549 -- celebrated it on the shores of Tampa Bay. This exploration and settlement of Florida by Europeans dealt a catastrophic blow to the First Floridians.

Few, if any, of Florida's indigenous people survived beyond the 1700s. Once numbering in the hundreds of thousands, the native population was decimated by European-introduced diseases, slave raids and warfare with both explorers and the Creek and Yamassee Indians from present-day Georgia and Alabama. Handfuls of survivors were probably taken to Cuba by the Spanish when Florida came under English control in 1763. Archaeological evidence discovered at the southern end of the Courtney Campbell Causeway dates from this time and suggests Cuban fishermen and their Tocobaga workers left for Cuba when the Spanish government withdrew from Florida.

In the mid-1700s, Native Americans from the areas north of Florida began entering the Tampa Bay area. These new residents had customs and traditions similar to their extinct southern neighbors, but there were also differences. The newcomers, later dubbed Seminoles, were a composite of a number of groups, including Creek, Yamassee and Apalachee, plus Africans, both freedmen and runaway slaves from colonial (later American) plantations.

Despite Florida being the first site of European colonization, Americans paid it little attention. When control of the territory transferred from Spain to England in 1763, Florida was divided into East and West Florida, becoming the 14th and 15th British Colonies. It was during this era that Hillsborough Bay and the Hillsborough River were named in honor of Lord Hillsborough, Secretary of State of the British Colonies under King George III. These southernmost colonies

remained loyal to the crown during the American Revolution and at the end of the conflict (1783) Spain resumed ownership.

The Second Spanish Period (1783 - 1921) was marked by the growing conflict between the Seminoles and U. S. citizens living on either side of Florida's northern border. Spain was powerless to stop the aggressors on either side.

Within the first two decades of the 1800s, two distinct settlements had grown in present-day Hillsborough County -- the Cuban settlement of Spanishtown Creek, near today's Hyde Park, and the Seminole village of Thlonotosassa, on the shore of Lake Thonotosassa. These enclaves attracted little attention until after the transfer of Florida to the United States in 1821.

National and international attention shifted to Florida when General Andrew Jackson made an illegal foray into the territory in 1817 to aid Americans living on the Florida/Georgia border who were fighting the Seminoles and to capture runaway slaves. Eventually, the United States would fight three wars against the Seminoles, with the last one (1855-1858) ending with the deportation of all but approximately 300 Seminoles from the state to the Indian Territory in Oklahoma. This last group lived deep in the Everglades of south Florida. From this determined group grew the Seminole Tribe of Florida and the Miccosukee Tribe of Florida of today.

As a result of early fighting between the Seminoles and white settlers, the American government established a series of forts throughout Florida. One of these, Fort Brooke, is now the nucleus of modern Tampa. Fort Brooke was established in 1824 by Colonel George Mercer Brooke and Colonel James Gadsden. During the Second Seminole War (1835-1842), the fort served as the United States Army's Southern Headquarters. Future U. S. President Zachary Taylor, a general during the war, served at Fort Brooke.

Within a few years of its founding, a small village sprang from the northern boundary of the fort. The first post office (1831) officially named the village Tampa Bay, but the name was soon shortened to Tampa. The meaning and origin of the name has been debated for years, with no consensus, but a strong theory is it was the name of a native village (sometimes spelled Tanpa) on the bay.

The first town plots were laid out in the 1830s by Judge Augustus Steele, but these were invalidated by the US government because they included Fort Brooke property. In 1847, the government reduced the size of the fort and donated the excess land to Hillsborough County. The land was platted for sale, the proceeds of which would fund the construction of a new county courthouse in Tampa, which by this point was the county seat. John Jackson completed the survey and drew the first official map of Tampa in 1853.

Two years after Jackson's map was complete, Tampa received a city charter from the State of Florida. Prosperity seemed certain, but national politics held different plans for Tampa and Hillsborough County. On January 10, 1861, Florida became the third state to secede from the Union.

The Confederate Army held Fort Brooke throughout most of the Civil War. It was shelled by

Union warships on several occasions and was captured in May 1864. After scouting the area for a day, the victors found nothing of use and abandoned the area. They returned until after the war as occupation troops.

Floridians, during Reconstruction, struggled with a wide variety of issues. Most Black Floridians were experiencing freedom for the first time. Freedmen from the Hillsborough County settlements of Hopewell, Knights and Springhead founded Bealsville, a community south of Plant City. While the Homestead Act granted the land, it did not guarantee the claimants would become landowners. To retain title, applicants had to construct homes, clear land and procure farming implements. Despite the overwhelming odds, the community succeeded, and still exists to this day.

Freedom, too, held no guarantee. It was tainted with the continued indignities heaped upon by whites, both southern and the new northern "carpetbaggers" who came to Florida to turn a quick profit at the expense of southerners, both white and black. Depression, both emotional and economic, hung over Hillsborough County.

The only profitable (legal) ventures were cattle and timber. As early as the 1850s, cattle traders established a route from Florida to Cuba. This trade resumed shortly after the conclusion of the Civil War. Cuban were able to pay in gold for cattle, so area ranchers soon were back on their feet. The trade was pioneered by Tampan James McKay. He shipped his cattle to Cuba from Gadsden Point, at the lower end of the Interbay Peninsula. McKay was joined in this endeavor by other Hillsborough County residents, notably the Lesleys, Lykes and Hookers.

Florida, and Tampa, however, remained destitute for almost two decades. Finally, in 1881, relief was on the northern horizon. Henry Plant was bringing his new railroad south, and he picked Tampa as his railhead. The railroad arrived in 1884, and the following year construction began on Tampa's first two cigar factories, Sanchez y Haya and V. M. Ybor and Co., in a new suburb -- Ybor City. The railroad and cigars would shape Tampa like nothing else had. Plant improved the fledgling port at the southwestern tip of the Interbay Peninsula, and soon Port Tampa was shipping goods and people throughout ports along the Gulf of Mexico.

Hillsborough County's population grew, as did its prosperity. Immigrants from Cuba, Spain and Italy came to work in the cigar factories of Ybor City and West Tampa. Tens, and later hundreds, of millions of hand rolled cigars were produced in Tampa factories. The industry enjoyed its status as Tampa's biggest money-maker until the 1930s, when the Great Depression, mechanization and cigarette smoking began to take their toll.

The same year that Ybor and Haya opened their factories, 1886, pebble phosphate was discovered in the Peace River in Polk County, Florida. Phosphate was later discovered in the Hillsborough River and in the largely undeveloped southern portion of Hillsborough County. Though not mentioned as much as the cigar industry and the railroad, the phosphate industry outlasted both. Daily, trains traverse the tracks through downtown Tampa, as they have done since 1889, carrying their loads of phosphate to the docks at Port Tampa.

In 1898, Tampa was one of three port cities selected as the port of embarkation for troops bound for Cuba and the Spanish - American War. During the summer months of June, July and August,

Tampa's population swelled by over 40,000 temporary residents. The small city was overwhelmed, but managed. Although local merchants saw increased profits in the summer of 1898, there was no direct, long term, benefit to Tampa. There were some indirect bonuses, not the least of which was the Army Corps of Engineers agreeing to dredge a shipping channel from Tampa Bay into Hillsborough Bay to downtown Tampa.

World War I would not have as drastic affect on Tampa, but World War II certainly would. During the war years of 1939 - 1945, thousands of servicemen and women, and their families, would come to Florida. Tampa sported three military bases: MacDill Army Air Base, Drew Field and Henderson Field. In addition, shipbuilding firms buzzed with activity 24 hours a day. The two largest, Tampa Shipbuilding and Engineering Company and McCloskey Shipbuilding Company, employed hundreds and produced cargo and navy vessels for the war effort.

After the war, many of the servicemen and women would return to Hillsborough County, where they once trained, to live and start families. The wartime growth continued, but in different areas. Tampa's port was thriving. MacDill Army Airfield would evolve to MacDill Air Force Base, home to the United States Central Command, while Drew Field became Tampa International Airport. Busch Gardens occupies much of the area formerly covered by Henderson Field.

The county's population increased dramatically after World War II, from 207,844 in 1945 to approximately 958,050 in 1999. Growth occurred in all areas, but urban sprawl would dominate some parts of the county, especially those close to the City of Tampa.