

Ormond Beach History

Twelve thousand years ago the first man came to Florida. These descendants of primitive Asiatics who migrated over the land bridge came to be called Indians. They hunted the animals along the Halifax and Tomoka Rivers leaving mounds behind. These mounds indicate that their makers ate, among other things, oysters and clams. Broken pottery, arrowheads, spearpoints and other artifacts have been found. At the time these people inhabited the area, the Halifax River would have been a shallow, fresh-water stream.

The Timucuan Indians made this area their home in the early 1500's. The Timucuan Tribe was one of six main tribes occupying Florida when the Spaniards made their first visit. The local tribes lived in fortified villages along the Tomoka and Halifax Rivers. What we know of them comes, in part, from the detailed diaries and drawings of the French explorer Jacques LeMoyne. He wrote of tawny, muscular people who were accomplished craftsmen in many ways. They were experts in weaponry, clay pottery, jewelry, and clothing -- made mostly of deerskin and moss. Physical fitness was a prized attribute of the Timucuan people. Training sessions in the form of "games" were common tribal activities. They were also excellent fishermen, hunters, and warriors.

Since they lived near the coast, their food consisted of fish and vegetables -- grown in their small farms along the river shores. In the winter, they moved to warmer inland forests where they ate the berries, nuts, and herbs that grew wild.

The primary settlement was called "Nocoroco" and is thought to have been located where Tomoka State Park is today. Spanish captain DePrado documented this village in the late 1500's in writings to the King of Spain. DePrado also documented the declining welfare of this tribe. In the early 1600's Alvaro Mexia was sent on an exploring expedition down Florida's northeast coast and created a map which shows Nocoroco on a peninsula between two rivers.

Within 200 years after DePrado's expedition, the Timucuan entirely disappeared from the east coast of Florida. It is thought their susceptibility to diseases brought by the Spaniards, emigration, raids from the Yamassee Indians, and the British raids from North Carolina sped their demise.

At the end of the Seven Years War in Europe, Spain ceded Florida to the British in exchange for Cuba. It was not until Florida became a British colony that pioneer settlers came to the area. The British government gave many land grants to its subjects, including 20,000 acres to Richard Oswald in 1766. Mount Oswald was a rice and indigo plantation encompassing what is now Tomoka State Park.

Indigo was big business during Oswald's time and was sent back to England for use as a dye for cloth and paints as well as a blueing agent for laundry. Naturalized indigo can still be found in the area today.

While under British occupation, Florida's first highway, The King's Road, was constructed. It covered 106 miles from St. Augustine to New Smyrna Beach and 48 miles from Palatka to Amelia Island.

When the British left in 1785, the meager beginnings of a plantation capital fell into ruin and did not flourish again until the Spanish land grants of the early 1800's brought planters from the Bahamas. Spain was in possession of Florida from 1783 to 1821 when it became a United States Territory.

James and George Anderson, benefactors of the Spanish land grants, came to Ormond and settled an area that had been a British plantation of earlier times -- Mount Oswald. The Dumettes had also settled in Ormond, taking the land grant that included "Rosetta Plantation," former holding of the Moultrie family during British occupation.

North of the Anderson's (Cobb's Corner) and Dumettes was the "Damietta," the cotton and indigo plantation of the Ormond family. Captain James Ormond I received a 2,000 acre land grant for his Damietta Plantation. Ormond was killed in 1817 by a runaway slave and the family moved back to Scotland.

James Ormond II returned to Damietta with his wife and four children, including James Ormond III in 1820. When James Ormond II died in 1829, his family abandoned Damietta. He is buried about four miles north of Tomoka State Park. James Ormond III would return many years later.

Little did he, or any other pioneer foresee the hostilities about to come. The second Seminole Indian War erupted in 1835. The battle was about hunting and fishing grounds and the freedom of movement of the Indians. There was a tremendous uprising against the planters and a massive evacuation to St. Augustine took place. The plantations fell victim to fiery raids.

"Bulow Ville," one of the most glamorous and wealthy of all the plantations, became a military outpost until the Indians came too close, too often. Soon Bulow Ville became a victim of the strife and only ruins remain today.

When the war ended in 1842, the sugar and cotton plantations along the Halifax and Tomoka Rivers were destroyed – never to be restored again.

Another economic interest was developing in this area at the outbreak of the Seminole War – ship building. Florida's live oak trees were used to build military and commerce ships. The live oak trade came to a dramatic decline when wooden warships were replaced by the ironclad ships of the Civil War. However, these timberland owners retained an interest in the area by selling the land to pioneer settlers and keeping the timber rights.

It was one of these sales, made in the 1870's to men employed by the Corbin Lock Company of New Britain, Connecticut, that brought families to Ormond searching for the perfect orange groves. They bought the Henry Yonge grant on the west banks of the Halifax and, remembering home, named the village New Britain.

About the same time, brothers John and Andrew Bostrom came to Ormond to homestead. Land sold for about \$2 per acre at the time and Andrew built one of the finest residences in this area at the time and named it Bosarve (on what is now Riverside Drive). Their two sisters joined them, keeping an open house for travelers.

John Anderson emigrated to Florida from Maine during this period. He, too, settled on the east side of the Halifax River. His first home, "Trappers Lodge," was located in the "wilds" of the peninsula. Later he built a plantation on the Halifax River and named it "Santa Lucia" after a popular Italian melody.

Other early pioneers brought by the Corbin Lock Company included the McNary family and the Dix sisters. These two families were highly involved in the early politics of New Britain. In fact, it was at the Dix sisters' home on April 22, 1880 that a meeting of the citizens took place to decide if the town should be incorporated.

John Anderson, Andrew Bostrom and James Ormond III became friends during this period. In fact, James Ormond III had recently visited Bosarve Plantation. This visit is said to have been instrumental in the town being named because John Anderson and Andrew Bostrom convincingly swayed the group to name it Ormond in honor of the James Ormond family. The name Ormond was adopted then and there – and so was the banana tree as the City's emblem.

Travel to and from Ormond prior to the railroad was limited to Old Kings Road on the mainland and the Savannah Trail on the peninsula. Crossing rivers along the route was accomplished by ferry or sailboat until the coming of the St. Johns and Halifax Railroad in 1886. In 1887 the first bridge across the Halifax River was built in Ormond opening up the east coast and naturally stimulating its growth potential.

Being far-sighted individuals, John Anderson and J.D. Price bought part of the Bostrom peninsula homestead and built the first wing of the Ormond Hotel. The community celebrated the opening – and New Year's Eve – on January 1, 1888.

The later years of the 19th century proved to be a time of growth. Florida, like the rest of the country, was experiencing the industrial revolution and all that came with it – thanks to industrialists like Henry Flagler. Pouncing on the potential of becoming a railroad giant, he purchased all the existing "little" railroad lines and coordinated a rail system from Amelia Island to Key West. His policy was to incorporate hotels along his line. The Hotel Ormond was enlarged to accommodate 600 guests and became one of his fashionable resorts, especially with winter guests.

The Hotel Ormond management coordinated activities and events and a variety of entertainment for their guests both on and off the premises. Anderson and Price, the former hotel proprietors began a new business of providing tours of the area in chauffeur-driven steam automobiles. They were also tour guides on the Tomoka River Cruise departing from the hotel and serving picnic lunches at their river cabin. These hot lunches and ice-cream were delivered to the cabin overland from the hotel.

Anderson and Price were also instrumental in the development of Ormond's "Birthplace of Speed" reputation. In 1902 they hired W.J. Morgan to promote racing on the beach. The first speed trial was run on the beach in that year. The beach proved to be the ideal race course and over the years a number of famous drivers tested their courage in this new-found sport of auto racing on Ormond's beaches.

During these early racing days, the gray-shingled Ormond Garage was built to accommodate race cars. In this garage the race cars were assembled, modified, serviced and even prayed over. Some of the drivers slept with their cars or in tents outside the garage. It is said that Henry Ford had to sleep on the beach during his first visit to Ormond because he couldn't afford a room in the hotel

Ormond's ideal race course also produced some records. On January 27, 1906, driving a "steamer," Demegeot (known as the "Speed King") reached 122.44 miles per hour drag racing down the beach. The mixture of speed and sand brought new excitement to Ormond shortly after the turn of the century.

During the "roaring twenties" prohibition created another area of interest for the locals. The coastline was a perpetual bootlegger warehouse. Local residents living or visiting the beach at Ormond could watch the signal lights from bootleggers at sea. When prohibition officers pursued a boat loaded with rum runners, the liquor was thrown overboard and the locals picked it up off the beach.

Of course, a look at Ormond's history would not be complete without mentioning one of the most famous residents: John D. Rockefeller. Mr. Rockefeller stated that he would live to be 100 years old. Determined to accomplish this, he became a "health nut" before it was fashionable. He sent his employees to find the most pollution-free place to spend his winters in retirement. They chose Ormond.

In 1914 John D. Rockefeller arrived at the Ormond Hotel and rented an entire floor for himself and his staff. After four winter seasons at the hotel, supposedly due to a dispute Rockefeller had with hotel employees he purchased the home built by Reverend Harwood Huntington, whose wife was the daughter of the creator of the Pullman Train Car Company. "The Casements," his winter cottage, was located only a few hundred yards to the south of the Ormond Hotel.

Through the years, Ormond residents became accustomed to have the "world's richest man" as a neighbor. Visitors to see Mr. Rockefeller in Ormond included such popular personalities of the day as the

Prince of Wales, Henry Ford and Will Rogers – to name just a few! Each winter he held the annual Rockefeller Christmas Party at the Casements. He invited his Ormond friends to sit around the tree, share gifts and holiday cheer.

Although it was believed that Rockefeller would live to see 100 years, he died in 1937 at the age of 97 while sleeping in the Casements, his home for over 19 years. After his death, his family put the house up for sale. Rockefeller himself might have been lost to Ormond, but the pride and prestige of his time here was not lost.

In the meantime, Ormond Beach's reputation as a fashionable winter resort center began to decline. By the outbreak of World War II, the wealthy were vacationing in Palm Beach or Jekyll Island.

Both the Ormond Hotel and the Casements saw drastic changes in the next forty years. By 1970, the hotel's ownership had been changed three times. With new management came new roles. The Casements, sold by the Rockefellers in 1939, also passed from owner to owner numerous times within the next forty years becoming a girls preparatory school and a home for the elderly. In 1959 the property was purchased by the Ormond Hotel Corporation with plans for development. Unfortunately, they never materialized. In 1973 the Casements was purchased by the City of Ormond Beach. Today, after its restoration, it serves the City as a cultural and community center.

Not all of the structures discussed previously have survived. The Bosarve, in later years known as the San Souci Hotel, on Riverside Drive is gone as is the old Coquina Hotel and the Ormond Hotel. Some have remained, however, such as the home of the Dix sisters, the Ormond Beach Women's Club and the Melrose House.

Ormond Beach celebrated its centennial in 1980 with a pageant and special events. In little over 100 years since the original settlement of New Britain, the City has grown from about 900 acres to more than 15,000 – and is still growing.

The information was gathered from many sources. To know more about the history of Ormond Beach, get a copy of, "Ormond-on-the-Halifax: A Centennial History of Ormond Beach, Florida" by Alice Strickland, at the gift shop of The Casements.