

FLORIDA'S *Last Frontier*

THE HISTORY OF COLLIER COUNTY
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KALEE

SEMINOLE INDIAN
RESERVATION

DEEP LAKE

BIG CYPRESS

WATERGLADES

SWELL MOUND

TURNER RIVER

CHOKALOHE ISLAND

1930

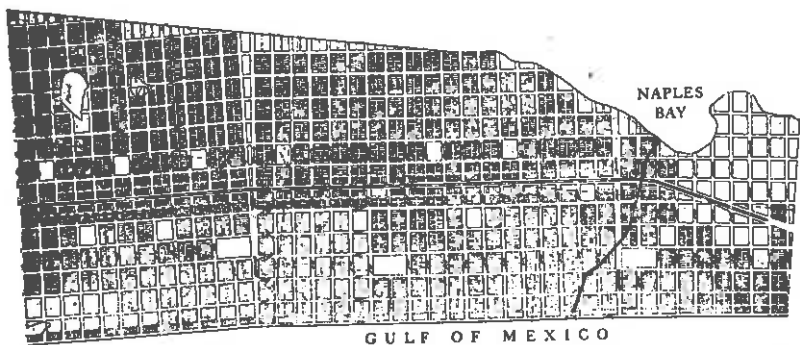
Naples I, "Crackers" and "Colonels"

THREE different groups, each giving it distinctive characteristics, have combined to make the Naples we know today. The first permanent white settlers—until recent years the only year-round residents—came in 1876. Left to their guidance alone, the area would probably have assumed much the same character as the other coastal communities in Collier County. But ten years later a second group, who built winter homes and became seasonal residents, discovered Naples and controlled its destiny down to about 1915. The third and last formative group came with the highway and railroad age and gave finishing touches to its present character.

The physical setting of Naples is unique in the county. Unlike other communities with sandy beaches on the lower west coast, Naples is situated on more than a narrow sandstrip, backed with mangrove swamp and lagoon. The land is sandy, with pines down to the edge of the water of the Gulf and an elevation up to ten feet within a hundred yards of the water.

Instead of low, swampy regions inland there is Naples Bay, which also gives the city a character all its own. Naples is on a long peninsula of land which lies between the bay and the Gulf and meets the outside waters at its south end near Gordon's Pass, named for Roger Gordon who had a fishing camp there about 1874.

Early comers to Naples found a wide shallow canal, apparently man-made, extending a little over a mile across the peninsula between the bay and the Gulf. All evidence of it is now gone, but the first plat of the townsite made in 1887 pictures it running just



Courtesy of Ed Scott, Everglades.
First plat of Naples showing course of canal from Gulf of Mexico to Naples Bay.

south of the Naples Hotel block in a direction slightly north of east to the bay. Lucien Beckner, who spent the winter of 1889-1890 there, recalls that at about its middle course there used to be some timbers standing in it, probably the remains of a gateway.

On the plat the canal is described as being fifty feet wide. Other sources describe it as a thirty foot canal three feet deep. T. S. Stearnes, running section lines in the Federal Survey in 1874, recorded in his field notes that at the highest point of land it was about twelve or fifteen feet deep and apparently partially filled up, "as it was a work of great antiquity." Forrest Walker, who first came to Naples in 1904, recalls that boys had to scramble up the sides of the canal. He also remembers that the bay end held water and was bridged at what is now Twelfth Avenue and that there was an oyster house at a pier on the Bay side.

There has been much speculation about the origin of the canal, but who dug it, and why, is not entirely clear. It is almost certainly of Indian origin. The Bernard Romans map of 1775 calls it a haulover, but that may indicate only that the beach end tended to fill up with sand and that no effort was made to keep it open. There was a small midden near the mouth of the canal, similar to others found near Indian canals. These are quite common and range up to six miles in length. As there is no record of activity there by the Spaniards, they may reasonably be ruled out.

That pirates dug it, as is sometimes conjectured, seems unlikely as there is an outlet to the Gulf three miles south at Gordon's Pass.

Some maintain that this pass is of comparatively recent origin, perhaps opened up by a storm. Whatever its origins, before its existence, the only outlet from the inland waterway would presumably have been down at Little Marco. It is not unusual for storms to alter the shoreline and open or close small inlets. After the 1910 hurricane, for example, Captain Stewart of Naples reported Gordon's Pass entirely changed; it was broadened out to a half mile in width and so shallow that he touched bottom several times while coming out at high tide.

Andrew Weeks, still living in Naples, recalls going there from Wauchula with his father, Madison Weeks, and his father's brother, John, in 1876. They settled at Gordon's Pass at the "Old Shell Pit," but later sold their squatters' rights to the Naples Company and moved further down the coast. John Weeks is elsewhere described as a Union sympathizer who took refuge in Key West during the War between the States. He was among a number of persons who located at Cape Sable to produce vegetables for the town of Key West. Reported still there in 1866, he may have gone to Wauchula before the 1876 date when the Weeks family became the first settlers at Naples.

These early arrivals were all squatters. How many of them came in the next ten years is not known. But they were sufficiently numerous to protest when the land became the property of Hamilton Disston in the early 1880's. And they protested even more loudly in the late eighties when the Naples Company acquired the townsite and began its development. Squatters could have purchased the land on which they had taken up residence and constructed improvements, for such a provision was made in the Disston contracts. But the early settlers believed they should each be permitted to homestead 160 acres of high and dry land. They had not been able to do so because the land was designated "swamp and overflowed" and title to it had been transferred to the state. It may be added that squatters rarely made any move to secure title until their possession was threatened.

In the 1880's the lower Gulf coast of Florida was attracting an increasing number of tourists, principally sportsmen who came to hunt and fish. Many of them made their homes on their yachts. They usually based at Punta Gorda, the nearest rail and telegraph head, or at Tampa. At Marco, Caxambas and Everglade small hotels grew to serve these seasonal visitors, but Naples was to prove different.