

## The Redneck Riviera

**By Lars Andersen**

In 1763, when Britain gained possession of Florida, they promptly divided it into two provinces. It was a very “British” move, but it wasn’t original. By creating an East and West Florida, the Brits were merely giving their own tidy version of an age-old state of affairs that had existed in Florida for thousands of years. Dating back to the first native tribes, the people of the panhandle, and the events that have shaped lives, have always been separate from those to the east.

For the earliest Floridians, it was natural barriers, more than any man-made agreements, which separated the regions. Sometimes, it was the Aucilla river, at other times, it was the Suwannee. But, as much as either river, it was the vast, inhospitable wetlands that lay between them, known as San Pedro Bay, which created a wide, natural buffer zone between neighboring tribes.

With the arrival of Europeans, the panhandle continued to be a separate entity from northeast Florida and the Peninsula. But for them, the separation had as much to do with the whims of history as it did with the physical landscape. With her Spanish “owners” focused on plundering the wealthy Incan and Aztec empires to the south, Florida was largely neglected. For much of the first two centuries of the Spanish presence, St. Augustine on the east coast and, later, Pensacola on the Gulf, were essentially service stations for trans-oceanic ship traffic. The two towns were on the same land mass, but they were hardly neighbors.

Throughout this period, the people of the panhandle and the events that shaped their lives, were closely tied to other Gulf coast cities to the west, such as Mobile and New Orleans. Far to the east, beyond the forbidding inland wilderness, St. Augustine lived her own life. Constantly embroiled in the struggle for control of the Atlantic seaboard, St. Augustine was a world apart from the Florida panhandle.

The first attempt to settle on Pensacola Bay came in 1560, five years before St. Augustine was founded. Shortly after the colony began, it was devastated by a hurricane. It would be nearly 140 years before another attempt was made to settle here. Desoto’s exploration had had shown this part of Florida to be devoid of the gold and silver which fueled Spain’s growing empire, so it was largely ignored.

Eventually, an increasing presence of rival European nations, combined with the need for a good harbor, prompted the Spanish to settle on Pensacola Bay in 1698. The newcomers soon realized that, while the area lacked precious metals, it held the veritable mother lode of pine forests – a crucial resource for maritime nations. In fact, almost the entire coastal plain of the panhandle, extending 20 to 30 miles inland, was covered by vast pine flatwoods, much as it is today. The only difference being that the slash pines which dominate today’s plantations rarely get over two feet in diameter before being felled,

while the huge, old-growth pines of the original forest, mostly slash and longleaf species, were often three times that diameter.

With its wealth of natural resources, deep harbor and military importance, Pensacola became one of the most important ports on the Gulf of Mexico. But, isolated from the rest of the Spanish colony, whose nearest settlements were at Cuba and St. Augustine, Pensacola was often left to her own devices to survive. In her first 120 years, the town was conquered and reconquered numerous times, and alternately flew the flags of France, Spain and England before finally hoisting the American flag in 1821.

With each change of flags came new influences – both cultural and architectural. It was this multi-national heritage which gave Pensacola the unique, cosmopolitan character that is still seen in much of its old architecture. But, despite its European charm, Pensacola's isolation and tumultuous youth made it just as bawdy and raucous as any frontier town in Florida.

In addition to the pines, large tracts of rich hardwood hammocks filled in the more fertile areas. Dominating the canopy of these forests were massive, ancient live oaks, whose strong, curved limbs were ideal for war ships. It was a time when the strength of nations was gauged by the might of their wooden ships and Pensacola quickly became an important military center. In 1827, with Florida newly acquired Territory of the United States, the U.S. Navy established a live oak plantation east of Pensacola. Eventually, steel became the material of choice for ship building, and the live oak 'crop' was left to fend for itself. Today, the old grove still stands in the Naval Live Oaks Preserve.

Florida's acquisition by the United States brought many changes to the Panhandle. The lackadaisical attitude that had characterized life in Spanish Florida was replaced by a fresh surge of enthusiasm and enterprise with the arriving Americans. Among their new ideas, was that of uniting the Territory by placing a capital midway between Pensacola and St. Augustine.

The site they chose for the new capital, which they called Tallahassee, was about twenty miles north of St. Marks, atop a high ridge known as the Cody Escarpment. This escarpment, or "scarp," is actually the edge of an ancient shoreline, and offers a sweeping view of the low pinelands stretching away toward the Gulf. Extending east and west of Tallahassee, and northward into Georgia, these beautiful, rolling lands have gone by many names. Sidney Lanier referred to this area as "the piedmont". To others, it is "middle Florida" or the "red hills" region.

Throughout the Florida's Territorial period and the early years of statehood, Tallahassee's importance grew, not only because of its status as State capital, but also because the area's fertile red soils were ideal for cultivation of many crops - especially cotton. With the threat from marauding Seminole Indians eliminated, compliments of the Second Seminole War, the ante-bellum plantation era found solid footing in the red hills.

By the early 1900's, cotton was no longer king and the red hills reverted to a land of small farms. This, in addition to the growing Florida State University, begun as the West Florida Seminary in 1856, caused Tallahassee's persona to slowly change. No longer an aristocratic *grande dame* of the south, the city evolved into the more grounded, academic center that it is today.

Forty miles east of Tallahassee, the red hills plateau abruptly gives way to a wide valley. Here, surging southward toward the Gulf, we find Florida's largest river, the Apalachicola. With a watershed draining nearly 17,000 square miles of Alabama, Georgia and Florida, this huge river carries nutrient rich, alluvial waters from as far away as the Appalachian foothills. In addition to Georgian water, the Apalachicola also delivers an interesting array of Georgia's plants and animals to the Florida panhandle. The river's deep, protected valley maintains cooler temperatures and acts as a corridor along which many species, extend their range southward. This unique riverine habitat has also allowed the development of some completely unique species such as the Torreya tree, for which Torreya State Park is named. This small, coniferous tree is found nowhere else in the world.

At the river's mouth, the small community of West Point was another beneficiary of the influx of settlers in 1821. As inland commerce and cotton plantations grew, the Apalachicola river became an important route of commerce. West Point, renamed Apalachicola, became an important seaport. From 1837 to 1850, it was the third largest port on the Gulf of Mexico, after New Orleans and Mobile. Every day, ships bound for ports around the world, most piled high with cotton, stopped in to the bustling town.

Today, the steamers are gone, but the little town at the river's mouth still looks to the water for her livelihood. These days, it's the fishing industry that feeds the town. The bay's nutrient-rich waters, fed by nearly 3,400,000 cubic meters of alluvial runoff every day, supports one of the most productive fisheries in the world, including nearly 90% of Florida's oyster harvest.

Elsewhere along the panhandle's coast, dozens of small villages, once the quiet sanctuary of fishermen and reclusives, are experiencing unprecedented growth. Here, as with other stretches of the Gulf coast, the lure of sandy beaches, and warm Gulf breezes, has spawned a booming tourist trade. No longer the isolated outpost of a distant empire, Pensacola and the rest of the panhandle's coastal cities host an international clientele. And, like so many other areas that have evolved into tourist destinations, concepts like "sustainable tourism," and "sustainable ecotourism" are no longer perceived as the jargon of tree-hugging environmentalists, but as very real strategies for survival – not only of the communities, but also of their natural environment.