

BREVARD COUNTY, FLORIDA : A Short History to 1955

John M. Eriksen

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***This book is dedicated to the memory of my mother,
Beatrice Cecelia Miller.
Her patience and dedication to excellence in
all things provided the inspiration for the following pages.***



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AUTHOR'S NOTE

The Florida Historical Society published the original version of this ebook in book format in 1994 (ISBN 1-886104-00-0-X). This new *e-book* format eliminates the many editorial revisions in that printing, and gives you the original manuscript plus many more photographs. Nearly every paragraph or subject has been documented with numbered reference notes.

What follows is the result of four years of full-time research and writing. I hope you enjoy reading *Brevard County, Florida: A Short History to 1955* (ISBN 978-0-9817187-0-5) as much as I enjoyed writing it. Recommend reader: *Adobe Digital Editions*.

John M. Eriksen
Author & Publisher
www.eBook-Browser.com
Suntree, Florida

PREFACE

Brevard County has been without a documented history since its creation in 1855. Although several short histories have contributed to our understanding of the county's past, none has presented a strict chronological outline of the area's influential events and their relationship to U.S. and world history.

The following pages do not reflect a complete and definitive history of Brevard. What is offered is merely a skeleton of the most important events, occasionally supplemented with notes of interest and a few brief sketches of the area's more colorful personalities.

No attempt has been made to judge or interpret the acts of institutions or individuals. Information, whether negative or positive, is not intended to be judgmental, rather only a truthful and accurate reflection of the source material. Yet a judgment is necessarily made that the author cannot avoid. The material presented may be skewed by the inherent necessity to sift through records and make bold choices between what is noteworthy, accurate, and significant, and what is extraneous or false. Nevertheless, considerable effort has been made to present information with accuracy, conciseness, completeness, and relevance.

As to time, history does not begin with boundary or name changes, or political claims. It begins with the first event. Therefore, this chronology begins well before the area's first name or political shape. It begins with the formation of the county's most important asset: the land.

As to place, the area currently known as Brevard County is only a historical fragment within a formerly boundless area of lagoons, lakes, creeks and prairies. Original boundaries stretched to the middle of the state and south to Okeechobee. The county was last reduced in 1959, when a strip of oceanfront below Sebastian Inlet was granted to Indian River County in a cooperative effort to bridge the inlet. If a history were to reflect only the events within today's boundaries, it would omit much of Brevard's heritage and the conflicts that resulted from a growing population.

Since this is a chronicle, many subjects are repeated throughout the text just as the ebb and flow of their importance unfolded over the years. Many quotations have been included to enhance the reader's appreciation of the period presented. Original phrases and spellings have been left within quotes.

The author is indebted to all those who contributed to this effort. A special debt is owed to Claire Ewertz for access to her extensive library of Brevard County manuscripts and antique books and the insight she provided on events and personalities of the 1800s. Appreciation is due to the many reference librarians throughout Brevard for their assistance, especially to the Titusville Public Library for access to the large file on Henry Titus. Philip Dye provided a rare 1856 New York Tribune editorial concerning Henry Titus in the Kansas Territory. Tracey Garbade and Joyce Dewsbury of the University of Florida's George A. Smathers Libraries provided useful materials on Brevard's pioneer families. Mary Ann Cleveland and Elaine M. Dickinson of the State Library of Florida located several pertinent WPA studies of county boundaries and maps. A rare collection of Florida's Acts of the Territorial Council was made available to the author by Ms. George McFarland of the Brevard County Law Library. Ms. Jan Crespino of the Patrick Air Force Base History Office supplied copies of studies relating to the development of the base. Paul Eugene Camp of the University of South Florida located many antique maps and interesting coastal charts from the late 1800s. Artists Nancy and Rick Dillen donated their time and talents to create illustrations that have enhanced the text.

Thanks also to Mr. Reed Kempfer for allowing the author to explore old Brevard's Jane Green Swamp, and to John Rawls, Cliff Rouse and Claire Ewertz for their expert guidance through the historic Haulover isthmus. Special thanks go to Betty Preece and Ellen Noyd of the South Brevard Historical Society and to Jim Bacchus, Diane D. Barile, Diane Bender, Bobby Bechtel, Alvin W. Parry, Mary Roberts, Cindy Wickham, for their perspectives and advice on the entire manuscript. Finally, this complex chronicle could not have been completed without hardware and software. Gratitude is extended to David Wickham for computer and printer and to Mr. and Mrs. Andrew Gynan for the necessary software. Many thanks to Scott A. Sutherland for his last-minute technical assistance and expertise.

J.M.E.

ebooks@ebook-browser.com

INTRODUCTION

Brevard is one of east central Florida's oldest counties. Established in 1855 when it inherited the 1844 boundaries of old St. Lucie County, the area originally encompassed 7000 square miles, Florida's largest political subdivision. A boundless land of oaks, palms and pines flanked by a clean, pristine lagoon, the county was largely without claim or improvement at the time of its creation.

Two decades earlier, U.S. troops had pushed the remaining native Americans off the land and into the seclusion of south Florida. The Armed Occupation Act brought in a handful of settlers around Fort Pierce in the 1840s, but after a few years most had abandoned the area, fearing renegade Seminole Indians. Some had caught "gold fever" and sought claims in the expanding western territories. Without a population, old Brevard inherited no roads and the only substantial improvements in the area were a scanty dragoon trail leading to Fort Pierce and the small canal at the Haulover, part of Orange and later Volusia County until 1879.

The shallow Ulamay Lagoon of the ancient Ais, proclaimed Banana River by Mills Burnham in the 1840s, continued to be shown by mapmakers as the "East Channel." Because of a dependence on waterway transportation, Merritt Island was clearly seen as an island, bordered on the north by Banana Creek. Along its flanks, the lagoons were packed with unknown and "inexhaustible" forms of marine life, free of net and hook, just as described by James Gadsden in his 1824 survey of the new territory's east coast. Early residents traveled almost exclusively by boat. They knew the lagoon was no river but the historic misnomer, Indian River, was not dishonored. Indeed, from the 1850s until the 1950s, the whole region was known far and wide as the *Indian River Country*, and became known to invalids for its healthy climate and to wealthy sportsmen for its abundance of fish and game.

Without roads or convenient inlets, the area remained almost uninhabited until after the Civil War. Prior to the war, the residents were few and far between: the Burnhams, Dummetts, Russells, Houstons, Carliles, Smiths, Feasters, Wilsons, Simmons and a scattering of cattlemen and farmers around a few inland settlements.

Forgotten for centuries, shipwrecked gold, diamonds, silver, and Chinese porcelain lay buried near the present-day McLarty Museum south of Sebastian Inlet. Dozens of mysterious burial mounds and shell middens dotted the landscape between the lagoon and the St. Johns River. But before the mound-builders and even before the lagoon had fully formed, native

Americans had made old Brevard their home. For endless centuries, Melbourne Man, Vero Man, and the Windover people stepped softly through a verdant world of natural rhythms and the land remained nature's domain. Only within the last few thousand years did the small native population begin to accumulate a record of their long existence. Their only *faux pas*, garbage middens of refuse shell and bone, would become valued as campsites by European hunters and later prized as the perfect road-building material by early county commissioners.

By 1900 much of the U.S. had already been transformed by man's inventions: fire, irrigation canals, and steam-driven machinery. But the industrial revolution bypassed Brevard. Overlooked in a world of change until the dawn of the twentieth century, the county finally welcomed the developers and speculators riding the iron horse in search of new land and opportunity. Suddenly, intensive fishing and hunting, new roads and ditches, drainage canals, lands cleared and fertilized for agriculture, experiments with exotic plants, and the dredging for inlets, causeways, parks, and mosquito control caused indelible alterations to the environment. In the relatively brief 50 years between 1900 and 1950, the seemingly timeless balance of the county's ecosystems had been tipped to serve man. The county's resources begged for respect and intelligent management during the post war boom.

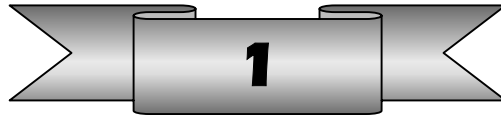
However, increasing restrictions seemed to encroach on fundamental rights. New game laws made criminals of Florida's old crackers. Hunting and fishing, first necessity, then sport, were Florida's oldest business and the American way of life in the 1800s. The survival skills of hunting in the Florida woods were passed from father to son. Early laws encouraged the practice, creating bounties on certain animals. An 1832 Territorial Act awarded a bounty for the destruction of any "wolf, bear, tiger, or panther." In 1841 the Council specifically targeted wolves in an "Act To Encourage The Destroying of Wolves," which paid citizens four dollars per scalp. The Florida black wolf, once a subspecies of the red wolf, is now extinct. Charles Pierce tells of the Indian River Country in the 1870s and 80s, when "it was the height of every would-be-hunter's ambition to kill a deer and among the boys...this feat was the crowning glory of their young lives."

Even so, by 1900 the county realized that the free-for-all was over. Since the mid-1890s, manatee captures were allowed only in the interest of science and only with a county permit. Other restrictions followed in the county that unknowingly held the highest diversity of marine life in North America, starting with President Roosevelt's dedication of the nation's first wildlife sanctuary. Three-acre *Pelican Island* became that sanctuary in 1903. The event seemed to symbolize the end of old Brevard and the beginning of a new era--the story of man's sudden impact on the timeless cycles of nature.

It is often asked, "Why is today's Brevard so long and unwieldy? Why is the county seat so far north?" The answer is Indian River. It was the lengthy lagoon that was the heart of the Indian River Country. The narrow fishery provided food for the ancients and the later pioneers. It harbored, protected, and cooled the first communities along the western shore. It supported rich hammock land for the developing orange industry and served as an avenue for communication, supplies, and northbound produce that funneled through Titusville.

Since 1855, the county gradually lost the bulk of its less populated western and southern territories that once included the areas of today's St. Lucie, Okeechobee, Martin, Indian River and parts of Highlands, Palm Beach and Polk Counties. But these were given up without much concern. Separated by the ocean prairie, marsh and river, the last western Brevardians struggled to organize their County of Osceola in 1887. The split significantly narrowed the county and it has since been committed to the old Indian River Country, the original heart of old Brevard that we know today as Brevard County.

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FIRST LAND/ FIRST LIFE

The shelly dunes of Brevard County ramble along a splintered remnant of the ancient continent of Gondwanaland. The existence of this former land will be affirmed on no map, although its turf is well-grounded in scientific theory. Far below the high ridges of central Florida lie sandstone and marine fossils that form the prehistoric cornerstone of Florida. Across the Atlantic, northwestern Africa rests on the same rock. Once common ground, the early Florida and African bedrock were split roughly 245 million years before present (MYBP) when Gondwanaland began to break up and drift south. The shifting land divided the super continent of Pangaea and gave birth to the Atlantic Ocean.

As the continents divided, a small sliver of the African mass lingered. About 25 million years later (220 MYBP) this remnant became established as Florida's underwater peninsula, fusing with the primeval American continent along Georgia's "Brunswick gravity anomaly." Geologists have shown that early Florida rock and its fossil record bear more resemblance to African geological history than to that of North America.

Florida remained submerged during the next 195 million years while Pangaea continued to divide along the Mid-Atlantic Ridge. Dinosaurs and other reptilians evolved without interruption, carried by the shifting crustal plates. Then suddenly, most of the largest reptiles disappeared, allowing mammals to gain prominence around 65 MYBP. One of the earliest mammals to inhabit underwater Brevard was the sea cow. The existence of this manatee-like creature, *Protosiren*, has been detected from carbonate deposits of 45 MYBP.

First Land

About 25 million years ago, a narrow central Florida peninsula emerged to support plant and animal life that already existed on the North American continent. Brevard was a shallow ocean floor at this point until the last ice age helped to lower sea levels. Freezing ice caps gradually

drew water from Brevard's flooded terrain. As recently as 20,000 years ago, extensive polar ice caps continued to beget land, creating a peninsula twice its current width. Brevard's current beachfront existed as a sprawling hinterland of scrub and marsh, miles from the highest tides. Over the last ten thousand years, melting icecaps flooded the peninsula and gradually produced the Brevard County coastline and lagoon systems of today.¹ Although there have been numerous ice ages over hundreds of millions of years, the recent emergence of man during this present activity has limited our reference to the period as *the ice age*.

Early man adapted to the cold snap with a nomadic quest for meat and warm fur. Soon the first Siberian hunters wandered into North America. Radiocarbon dates of various ancient tools indicate that between 40,00 and 20,000 years ago, a sporadic progression of nomad hunters began to traverse an ancient land bridge known as Beringia.² Named for the much-later (1728) explorations of the Dane, Vitus Bering, the area, exposed by low seas, was once a broad chilly pasture in the area of the present Bering Strait. Large mammals had been crossing ice age bridges like Beringia for millions of years.

The first Americans survived exclusively on the huge bison, mammoth, giant sloth and similar animals. While in pursuit of their prey, they inadvertently entered North America. After thousands of years of roaming, some descendants of these Asian nomads reached central Florida.³

Florida's First Snowbirds

Scientists are certain that people have been in central Florida for thousands of years, possibly as early as 12,000 years ago when the first of these ancient nomads arrived.

Evidence indicates that the first Floridians were not a timid people, huddling within their flimsy thatched shelters. These aborigines spent their days tracking the dwindling megafauna that still existed on the peninsula. The fact that they were well-organized and efficient hunters has been offered as a partial explanation for the many extinctions that occurred upon their arrival in Florida. *Pleistocene overkill* is the term used by archaeologists to describe early man's organized, aggressive killing of only the largest mammals. Science can only speculate on the other factors that contributed to the extinction of these large beasts, such as the Pleistocene camel and Florida's huge saber cat, smilodon.⁴

Since 1916 archaeologists have known about Vero Man and other

skeletal remains of early central Floridians. Many discoveries occurred during the drainage and road-building projects of the early twenties, when human bones were found mixed with bones of extinct megafauna, such as the giant sloth and mastodon.

One important find followed the creation of the Crane Creek Drainage District of 1922. Workers discovered human bones while extending a drainage ditch west of Crane Creek. Scientists worked the site between 1923 and 1926. What became known as Melbourne Man was their evidence that early people lived in the area of the present Melbourne Golf Course about 6,000 years ago. Since most of these early sites offered so little clear, undisturbed evidence, the conclusions of researchers on "what, when, or how" involved a fair amount of guesswork.⁵

Our best knowledge of some of these early people is from an ancient burial site south of Titusville. Located within a housing development called Windover Farms is a prehistoric cemetery. Due to the decline of large grazing herds, early Floridians became more stationary. The Windover site is an example of some of the first permanent Brevardians. Occupied for at least 1000 years between 8000 and 7000 years ago, the ancient cemetery was discovered by the developer, EKS, Inc.

The site was extensively worked from 1982 through 1986 by archaeologists from Florida State University. Dr. Glen Doran and others found that these early Brevardians did not bury their dead in mounds as later Indians preferred. They did just the opposite. The deceased were prepared with wrappings and placed in ponds. Where the water was deep, stakes were used to fasten them to the bottom. Scientists believe the practice was unique, occurring only in central and south Florida. For the Windover people, the ritual turned out to be a perfect memorial.

During the 1980s, after 75 centuries, the Windover site yielded one of the largest and best-preserved samples of skeletal specimens and artifacts from that age to be found in North America. Some of the specimens contain the oldest known human cell structure and DNA. The remains of about 172 individuals were removed from the site, many with portions of brain tissue intact.

This archaeological bonanza also supplied scientists with many artifacts, such as carved manatee and deer bones, stone knives, and the oldest and largest collection of woven materials in the Americas.⁶ Tools made from manatee ribs and sharks teeth were uncovered, indicating that these people may have hunted and fished in the developing lagoon area to the east. The natural abundance of their hammock home allowed them time to develop many styles of weaving. They also had the time to care

for their disabled; spina bifida was found in 21% of one set of skeletal samples.

Researchers also unearthed spears with points carved from chert. Chert is a fine-grained variety of mineral quartz, also known as flint rock. This rock was used for axes, knives, and spear tips only, since the bow and arrow was not yet in use. Since chert is most commonly found in western and northern Florida, it is likely that the Windover people had trading partners and may have traveled inland. While the distant ancestors of these people may have seen or hunted the few remaining large prehistoric beasts of central Florida, Windover men of 5500 B.C. were left with only small game along with fishing and gathering for subsistence. The Windover people lived in the Titusville area and used the same burial ritual for 1000 years. Their burial pond is now on the National Register of Historic Sites and is protected from further disturbance.⁷

The Atlantic had been flooding the lowlands during this period and as the Indian River Lagoon formed, the rising estuary attracted diverse marine life. Soon small Stone Age communities developed along its new shores. Without advanced tools or agricultural skills, they remained on the fringe of the new Stone Age for thousands of years. Probably not until about 1000 B.C. did distinct tribes develop with skilled bowmen and not until 800 A.D. was there some dependence on crops by inland natives.⁸

The First Fishermen

During the 2500 years prior to the arrival of Europeans, these "Indians" living near the Mosquito and Indian River Lagoons developed into the distinct tribes of *Timucua*, *Ais*, and *Jeaga*. Until the early 1900s, the Brevard area was littered with dozens of their shell middens. The middens were the remains of oysters, clams, and other seafood that were eaten and discarded by these early people. Middens along the eastern lagoon marked the location of long-established wintertime villages. Numerous middens could also be found along the upper St. Johns River. Altogether, early archaeologists in the area between the St. Johns and the Indian River Lagoon have discovered the remains of well over 100 middens. Burial mounds and shell middens were the only legacy of the many centuries of Ais occupation. But intruding newcomers had no interest in Ais history, except to dig occasionally into the mounds looking for treasure.

In 1766, the famous explorers John and William Bartram did not know

who to thank when they found the only apparent dry refuge in what is now northwest Brevard County: Baxter Mound. The mound, a former shell midden, was only a small rocky hammock lying just above the water. In 1838, a more prominent midden on the western shore of Lake Winder served to elevate Fort Taylor during the Second Seminole Indian War. One of the more interesting middens, known as Gleason Mound, was located just east of the southern tip of Merritt Island. The Indian Harbour midden was said to be at least fifty feet wide and as much as eighty feet in height. East of the midden was a long causeway passing through a lake and wetlands to a large burial mound. Most of these mounds and middens were removed to construct early shell roads. Much of the material was removed between 1895 and 1920 to build the county's main thoroughfare, designated as the *Dixie Highway* in 1915.⁹

The most famous midden eluded the Dixie Highway frenzy and still exists at the remote Turtle Mound exhibit within Apollo Beach State Park in Volusia County. Known on early maps as Sorrochos or Mount Tucker, this midden was an important landmark for early Spanish navigators, reminding them to steer northeast at this point. (Apollo Beach Park is on A1A, south of New Smyrna Beach.)

Turtle Mound served as the southern boundary of the Timucua people and the Jeaga occupied the area south of the St. Lucie River. Between these two were the Ais. Brevard's Indian River Lagoon, originally Rio d' Ais, was known to the first Spanish explorers as the Province of the Ais.¹⁰

The Ais dominated the lagoon from Banana Creek on north Merritt Island to their capital town near Riomar at Vero Beach. The capital had various names, but was commonly known as Ais. Feared as the seat of the most powerful chief on the east coast, it was a center of fierce resistance to the European newcomers. No European power was able to conquer the Ais tribe. The Spanish tried to enslave them, slaughter them, convert them, and then cajole them with gifts. In the end, dirty rat-infested ships brought the only gifts the Ais could not resist: the chronic diseases of urban Europe.

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