EARLY HISTORY OF APALACHICOLA with Bibliography

Compiled by the Apalachicola Area Historical Society

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In the early 19th Century, Apalachicola was the third largest port on the Gulf of Mexico, only surpassed by New Orleans, and Mobile. The Apalachicola-Chattahoochee-Flint river system, as a pre-road/pre-railroad mode of commercial transport, is why the mouth of the Apalachicola River was populated early. The area that is now Apalachicola had a British trading post called "Cottonton" at on the mouth of the river, and In 1827, the town was incorporated as "West Point", and incorporated again as Apalachicola in 1831.

MOST COMMON QUESTION: One answer is “**Apalachicola”** probably comes from the Hitchiti Indian words "apalahchi" (on the other side) and "okli" (people). Alternatively, “Apalachicola” is a word interpreted as a ridge of earth produced by sweeping the ground in preparation for a council or peace fire. Over time, the term has been translated as an area of peaceful people. “Land of the friendly people” is a common interpretation. The current official city population is 2200, the county’s population is 12,000.

EARLY HISTORY

Even before the city was founded, the area surrounding Apalachicola was a strategic location. Remnants of native American cultures date back to the middle Archaic period (2000 BCE), and documentation exists that claims native cultures had lived here during the intervening Woodland and Mississippian periods (from 1000BC) A large population probably existed here due to stable water supplies and abundant game and seafood. Middens left by the indigenous people are composed primarily of clam and oyster shells. Some of the larger middens were used as burial sites. The Pierce Mounds on Bluff Road were studied by C. B. Moore in 1902, and again by Nancy White in 2013 (https://www.usf.edu/arts-sciences/departments/anthropology/documents/white2013piercemounds.pdf)

ENTRANCE OF EUROPEANS

Europeans first explored Franklin County in the early 1500s and they left descriptions of Dog, St. Vincent and St. George Islands. The Spanish built a fort here in 1705. Florida was ceded to the British in 1763, but British rule lasted only twenty years. The Spanish recaptured Florida at the end of the Revolutionary War.  
As the second Spanish Period commenced, some British trading companies, including Panton, Leslie, and Company and later John Forbes and Co. were allowed to remain. These Spanish-sanctioned companies were very active, but encountered a number of difficulties, including one in the person of William Augustus Bowles.

FAVORITE “LOCAL” PIRATE: Bowles, a white man, born in Maryland, fought with the British in the Revolutionary War at the young age of 13. While stationed in the British fort in Pensacola, he deserted and soon after began his long affiliation with native tribes. He lived a notably adventurous life, until his death at age 42 in Morro Prison in Havana Cuba. Along the way, he declared the existence of the “State of Moscogee,” and declared war against Spain and the trading local company. In 1799 returning from England, he was shipwrecked near Saint George Island in HMS Fox. He was carrying supplies to fight the Spanish and their affiliated trading companies.

Why is Bowles important to the history of Apalachicola? Because of the “Forbes Purchase.”

In 1811, the trading company John Forbes and Company persuaded Spain and the Indians to cede 1.3 million acres between the Apalachicola and St. Marks Rivers to their firm because of large debts owed to their trading company by Indians, and difficulties with Bowles. The transfer became known as the Forbes Purchase.

Since this Spanish land grant predated the acquisition of Florida by the United States in 1821, all such Spanish grants were reviewed by the US courts. This particular grant being so large and significant, it worked its way through the courts and the final ruling ratified for Forbes and company by then called the “Apalachicola Land Company”. With this ruling the fate of Apalachicola and many of its citizens was impacted.

The Adams-Onis Treaty, which went into effect in 1821, transferred Florida from Spain to the United States.  As part of this treaty, Spanish land grants in Florida made prior to January 24, 1818, were supposed to be lawful.  The United States did not have any legal mechanism in place to recognize the large land grants until 1828, when the U. S. Congress allowed claimants to file suit in federal court to settle their titles.  The owners of what would be known as “The Forbes Purchase” filed suit that year.  The U. S. District Court denied their land grant in 1830, but on appeal the U. S. Supreme Court affirmed the land grant in 1835.  The Apalachicola Land Company was formed to develop and market the million plus acres of this property.  Their efforts including laying out and developing the town of Apalachicola.

TWO SIDES & TWO CITIES: The two sides in the court case, for and against ratification staked their claims in the battle of supremacy over the cotton trade and the future of the port. A significant number of Tallahassee elite chose to side against the ratification, and swiftly attempted to bolster the emerging town of St Joseph, west of Apalachicola and outside the boundary of the land grant.

St Joseph (1835-1841) developed into a well-financed and politically strong rival of Apalachicola. It hosted the first Constitutional Convention in 1838, to move the Territory of Florida toward statehood. The towns’ two weekly newspapers were rife with disparaging references to each other, many not true.

However, the town of St. Joseph was not long-lived. In 1840, a ship taking advantage of St Joseph’s lengthy pier, disgorged the feared “Yellow Jack” (Yellow Fever) and the population was struck by a localized epidemic (followed in short order by a hurricane), which so devastated the town that it was abandoned.

BACK TO APALACHICOLA

The town is blessed with a number of extant significant structures, despite the ravages of hurricanes and fires. The National Register’s Apalachicola Historic District lists hundreds of structures dating from the 1830s to the twentieth century.

One of these is the Harrison-Raney Cotton Warehouse, an example of Greek revival architecture made of brick with granite accents, on Apalachicola’s Water Street. Water Street was the center of trade, and it is said during the height of the shipping season one could walk its length over cotton bales without setting foot on the pavement. Originally, there were more than fifty of these three- story buildings. The Apalachicola Land Company, once the court had ruled in their favor, instituted building codes hoping to mimic similar buildings still found today on Water Street in New York.

Most of these buildings were destroyed in a series of fires and hurricanes. Luckily, an investor in the renovation of the Grady Building, undertook an extensive archaeological dig on the riverfront, and extracted many objects, which we hope will someday be displayed in the Raney Carriage House.

Large residences include the Orman and Raney houses, both completed in 1838, represent the town’s early heyday. Both are currently public ~~H~~ouse ~~M~~useums, Orman as a State Park, and Raney owned by the city, but run as a M~~u~~seum by the Apalachicola Area Historical Society. Each contains both family articles and those of the period. NOTE: the Orman House is CLOSED for extensive restoration, and the Raney House – having also received funds from the state – will begin restorative work in 2023.

Trinity Episcopal Church, also built in 1838, was built in New York, and its wooden framework was shipped by schooner to Apalachicola where it was put together with wooden pegs. Trinity was known to welcome Apalachicola’s Black residents as well as its White ones, although they sat separately in the church.

SLAVERY: The US Census Federal Slave Schedules for 1850 and 1860 list numerous owners of slaves in Apalachicola. In 1850, there were 60 slave owners and 375 slaves in Apalachicola. In 1860, the number of slave owners was 62, and the number of slaves had increased to 519 slaves. The Historical Society is pleased that the North Florida African American Corridor Project has been awarded a grant to build an African American Museum of History and Culture, next to the Holy Family Senior Center, a former Catholic Church-run school for African American children. The soil in and around Apalachicola was considered too poor to grow cotton, but white merchants found great opportunity for accumulating wealth by setting themselves up to receive cotton from plantations upriver and sending it to New York, Boston and Liverpool.

The revenues from the export of cotton kept the town prosperous, and first world goods like fine liquor and West Indian fruits and molasses were brought in on ships which left packed with bales of cotton. A French Consulate was established in Apalachicola to ensure that France’s need for the uniquely American export was met. Cotton was the single largest export of the young nation, and Apalachicola was the principal Florida port, well before Florida had even become a state (1845).

FAMOUS APALACHICOLIANS: Botanist **Alvan Wentworth Chapman** settled in Apalachicola in 1847. In 1860, he published his major work, *Flora of the Southern United States*, the first comprehensive description of US plants in any region beyond the northeastern states. He corresponded with the well-known 19th century botanist, Asa Gray at Harvard, exchanging specimens and consulting on nomenclature. Before his death in 1899, second and third editions of his book were published. His house still exists in town at 6th and Ave E (Hwy 98). “Reminiscences of **Alvan** Wentworth **Chapman**” (1921), was written by a young local woman, Winifred Kimball, who often journeyed out with the doctor to collect specimens.

Dr. John Gorrie is probably the best known Apalachicolian, and his statue stands in Statuary Hall in the US Capitol. It was placed there by the State of Florida in 1914. During his life, Gorrie kept himself busy with his medical practice, his civic duties as holder of every public office (Postmaster, Intendent (Mayor), bank charter board member and church vestry, research into the benefit of cooling the sickrooms of fever patients, and his subsequent experimentation with the production of ice.

In the 19th century literally tons of ice were loaded onto ships in Boston, destined for the American South and the Caribbean. Frederick Tudor, the king of this business, cut ice from New England ponds, packed it in sawdust and straw, and shipped it to ports all around the world. Dr. Gorrie’s wife, Caroline, had a standing order for ice for her small hotel. It was with this ice that Gorrie first experimented with cooling the rooms of his patients. Longing to be free of the irregular schedule of ships from Boston, he spent several years developing equipment which produced “artificial” or manmade ice. In 1851 he received a US patent, and one in Europe as well.

One often-told story about Apalachicola centers around a Bastille Day Party. The French Consul hosted a party, promising to serve chilled champagne. There was no ice in the ice house and no signs of the ice boat. Many citizens bet against the Consul being able to fulfill his promise, but, using ice produced locally by Dr. Gorrie, the Consul amazed the attendees and won his bets.

Right up until his death in 1855, Gorrie was stymied by the lack of backers to commercialize his equipment. Some say it was the result of Tudor questioning his ability to produce ice. Gorrie fell into obscurity. But around 1900, the Whiteside family, whose Apalachicola Ice Company was a mainstay of the growing seafood industry, literally resurrected Gorrie and their efforts are why he is now so well known.

CIVIL WAR PERIOD

At the commencement of the “War between the States,” the Union strategy to blockade the southern port affected Apalachicola in a major way. Without the ability to export cotton and without any goods coming in, the town was reduced to a mere shadow of its former self. The population is said to have dropped to under 500. The local enlistees, first into their home militia, were ordered into the state military, by then Governor Milton, and eventually were consolidated into the Confederate Army.

**Interesting story**: The Apalachicola Guards flag, which hangs as the background of the Civil War exhibit in the Museum of Florida History, is thought to have been sewn by Apalachicola ladies. It represented a unit, which upon being sent to Chattahoochee, Florida and issued rifles, renamed themselves the “Franklin Rifles”.

During the Civil War, it is said that the US Navy “captured” Apalachicola, but the local story is that when the Union Navy requested the city to surrender, all the elected officials had left town, so there was no one with the authority to surrender. The town was a no-man’s land.

The town was of a mixed mind about the war. While Thomas Orman actively supported the Confederacy, and even put a barrel on his roof when the Union sailors came ashore as a signal to Confederates to keep hidden, one of the town’s other notable inhabitants, Dr. Alvan Wentworth Chapman, was a born and raised Yankee, and supported the Union. He is documented as having been a preferred source for Union intelligence. Cornell University’s Making of America webpage (http://collections.library.cornell.edu/) offers full text (searchable) of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies. It shows that when the Union desired information about the explosion of the newly launched Confederate ~~G~~unboat, CSS Chattahoochee, Chapman was a source.

As the war ended, and the South tried to regroup, Apalachicola found itself at a disadvantage. Railroads had been built East-West allowing cotton planters to ship directly to Atlantic ports. While lumber became a prominent export in the 1880s, as the vast forests of pine and cypress were being logged out of the Apalachicola National Forest and what is now the Tate’s Hell State Forest, the town found it difficult to regain its footing. Eventually seafood, especially oysters, became the mainstay of Apalachicola, and Franklin County. The Ruge brothers developed a pasteurization and canning process which allowed the product to be shipped more widely. Modern Apalachicola has a population of under 2400, exceeded by hundreds in the cotton export seasons of the 1830s.

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