

Area Information ...

History & Facts

History of Homosassa

Old Homosassa is an area rich in history. Its varied habitat and natural features, combined with a history of different cultures, has made Old Homosassa the unique community it is today. The first inhabitants were Native Americans. Archeological research indicates that Citrus County was occupied by pre-historic aboriginal people for 12,000 years prior to the arrival of Spanish explorers. Although Hernando de Soto explored the area in the 16th century, it was the passage of the Armed Occupation Act of 1842 that spurred development. The act stated that a 200,000-acre area south of present-day Gainesville was open for settlement. This law stipulated that one hundred and sixty acres would be given to any head of family or single man over eighteen who was able to bear arms, could live on the land in a house fit for habitation during five consecutive years and cultivate at least five acres.

William Cooley took advantage of this opportunity offered by the Federal government. Cooley and his neighbors found the Act's incentives appealing and submitted numerous applications to settle the land. As a landowner, merchant, pioneer, shipper of red cedar and the area's first Justice of the Peace, Cooley played a prominent role in the settlement of Homosassa.



David Levy Yulee (1810-1886), who built Florida's first cross-state railroad, was the State's first U.S. Senator. He came to Florida as an immigrant and rose to become an outstanding businessman and statesman. He served in Florida's territorial council, as territorial delegate to congress, and helped write the State's first constitution. His sugar mill began operations in 1849. During the Civil War he supplied the Confederates with sugar, syrup and molasses. Federal raiders burned the Yulee home May 29, 1864, but the mill and plantation escaped destruction.

Cooley sold his land to **David Levy Yulee** and moved to Tampa in 1847. With the land purchased from William Cooley and the land that had been left to his father through a Spanish land grant, Yulee "established a 5,100-acre plantation and sugar mill in 1846. In the early 1840s David Levy Yulee, one of Florida's first senators and developers, purchased thousands of acres on the Homosassa River. His slaves cleared over 1000 acres of land and planted sugar cane. He constructed a sugar mill and built a fine home on Tigertail Island, which became a port of call for the coastal steamers that linked the steamers on the Gulf to the world. A post office was established in 1845 and the 1850 Census reveals that settlers from many places and with varying skills were entering the area, taking advantage of land offered by the Armed Occupation Act. Homosassa's growth was interrupted by the Civil War. Interrupted is an appropriate word because only a few years after the war, there were many enterprises underway. "During the Civil War, Homosassa operated in support of the Confederate effort and was successful in stopping an attempted raid early in the war. In the end however, Homosassa was defeated and fell victim to the Union gunboats. Union soldiers destroyed the great sugar plantations, ending an era.



The Yulee Sugarmill

David Yulee felt first-hand the effects of the war. In May of 1864, a Union Naval attack destroyed Mr. Yulee's mansion on Tigertail Island in the Homosassa River. The Sugar mill was not destroyed, but never put to use again.

Seeing the area as an opportunity for profit, three Northern investors created the Homosassa Company in 1884 to develop Old Homosassa's land. John Dunn, Joshua Chamberlain, and Benjamin Dutton purchased thousands of acres of land once owned by Yulee with the intent on developing the area as a vacation spot for northern visitors, complete with railroad access and a resort hotel.

The Homosassa Company platted its acquired lands with full intentions of creating a city designed in the neo-classical tradition of combined diagonal streets and grid pattern. The 1886 plat pre-dated the "City Beautiful" planning movement, in which cities included public parks on the waterfront. However, the plat did express two of today's community goals, pedestrian connectivity and public access to the waterfront, to greater extent than exists today. The platted public plaza, a pedestrian amenity, was replaced by a fire station, a danger to pedestrian activity. The platted lake access to the river was never constructed and is now the elementary school.

Although the 1886 plat was never completely constructed and has been compromised by repeated street vacations and lot reconfigurations, its original design intent is a historical legacy that is in part visible today. In 1985 a prescriptive plat was recorded based on a survey of the area and the original town plat.

In 1887-1888, the Silver Springs, Ocala, and Gulf Railroad Company constructed from Dunnellon to Homosassa an extension of its Ocala to Dunnellon line, which was built in 1885-1887. The train opened up trade and tourism between Homosassa and Ocala, and from Ocala to the northeast and the rest of the country. The railroad facilities in Homosassa consisted of the depot, a freight dock and storage shed, a siding for cars to be loaded and a turntable for turning the locomotive around. In November 1941, the track and depot in Homosassa were retired and the nostalgic days of railroading came to an end.

A familiar pattern was beginning to evolve, one that is still being used by land developers. Advertising and a well-designed sales campaign drew prospective buyers who came as tourists, staying at hotels built by the land company. Well-connected investors and visitors to the area such as Grover Cleveland, John Stetson, John Jacob Astor, and Henry Plant added prestige.

The West Coast Development Company tried again in the 1920s to take advantage of the public's fascination with Florida land. Like the Homosassa Company, they purchased thousands of acres, advertised heavily, brought in celebrities to attract prospects, and began ambitious building projects.

The Great Depression brought notions of powerful development to a halt in the 1930's. The only legacy that remained was Dunn's Homosassa Inn "which was visited by such notables John Jacob Astor, Winslow Homer, and Thomas Edison." (Homan & Reilly). Now owned by the MacRae family as a private residence, the Homosassa Inn still stands as a beautiful landmark for Homosassa.

Although the construction of U.S. 19 in the 1940s provided an easier access for motoring tourists, it wasn't until the 1960s that another development company was influential in Old Homosassa. The Norris Development Company, led by Bruce Norris of New York demolished the original Riverside Lodge built by B.F. Dutton and created a resort with such amenities as a boat ramp, pool, and a 74-room hotel. This time, Homosassa was widely recognized as a recreation, resort, and retirement center. Moreover, Homosassa's transition from water-dependent (fishing) to a water-enhanced (tourism) economy was clear.

The latter half of the twentieth century brought with it an increase in infrastructure for Old Homosassa. The roads were paved from US 19 into the heart of Old Homosassa soon after the Norris Development Company had built the Riverside Resort. Along with increased tourism came permanent residents and the necessary infrastructure; water lines were laid and became available in 1957, and a fire station, library, new elementary school, and new post office were all built in the years that followed.

David Yulee's sugar cultivation was not the only natural resource in Homosassa that provided an economic market. The lumber and citrus industries were both integral to Homosassa's growth and notoriety. Cedar mills processed the lumber from the trees which had once covered all of the coastal islands until there were few trees left and the sawdust was used for fill in the swampy shores so that more land could be developed. Second forest growth has covered the evidence of these industries and there has been no agricultural redevelopment.

The natural resource that has had the most impact on Homosassa's economy is the fishing industry, both commercial fishing and sports fishing. The numerous species found throughout the Homosassa River and Gulf of Mexico have

provided a subsistence and profitable way of life for generations of Homosassa residents, as well as recreation for tourists. From the time of the Indians to the time of the “Mullet Express,” the seafood industry was a staple and integral part of Homosassa’s culture. Unfortunately, most of the commercial fishing industry has succumbed to the combined pressures of decreasing catches, pollution, net bans, environmental regulations, and the high cost of fuel and fleet maintenance. Today, Old Homosassa still has a sense of place as a “fishing community” which coexists with an ever-growing tourism industry. Until now, development of the community has been slow and largely in keeping with the community’s image of itself.

The Community

Seventy percent of Homosassa’s citizens are aged 45 or over, contributing to a median age of 58. Considering that the median age for Citrus County is 53 and that the median age for Florida is 39, it is clear that Homosassa is an “older” community. Age is the most important dimension of population in that it relates to service needs. The older composition of Old Homosassa is one reason for the goals of pedestrian connectivity and local community facilities being identified in “visioning” meetings.

Homosassa’s recent population growth rate is smaller than that of Citrus County and Florida. This smaller growth rate is largely responsible for the retention of Old Homosassa’s character. It is anticipated that the future sewer lines, projected to be installed by 2004, and the nearby availability of the Suncoast Parkway will bring increased population growth to the area.

Old Homosassa has numerous businesses and organizations, all of which contribute to the character and success of the community. The following is a description of the major businesses, historic structures, organizations, government entities, and public facilities...

Resorts

The tourism and sports fishing industries have led to the development and redevelopment of two notable resorts. These resorts have been maintained in private ownership, somewhat restricting public access to the Homosassa River while at the same time maintaining high aesthetic standards for tourists and local customers.



Homosassa Riverside Resort

Initially built as a “bed-and-breakfast” inn in the late nineteenth century by B. F. Dutton, this location has been a destination for visitors since its inception.

Today, the Riverside Resort is a 74-bed resort catering to both tourists and the community. Included within the resort are a restaurant, private boat ramp, marina, dive shop, conference room, and various guide services.



MacRae's Bait House

MacRae’s of Homosassa

Established by Scottish immigrants Mary Isabell and James Alexander MacRae in the early twentieth century, J. A. MacRae’s General Store was the first of many MacRae family business endeavors.

Currently, MacRae’s maintains a bait-house, a 23-room motel, boat rentals, tiki bar, gift shop and various charter services.

Historic Residences

The history of Old Homosassa is visible today in these structures. One of the community’s goals is to preserve this historic character.



MacRae's House

Built by land agent and developer John Dunn in 1882, the Homosassa Inn was a sportsmen's lodge. James and Mary MacRae purchased the structure in 1919 with the provision that the previous owner, Helen Richardson, be permitted to live there until her death. In 1932, the MacRae family reopened the house as a lodge and later a restaurant. By the mid-1990's family members had once again converted the Homosassa Inn to a private home.



The Whilden House

Elta Whilden's House

Constructed in 1926, the Whilden house is still occupied by one of its original residents. As Old Homosassa's oldest resident, Ms. Elta Whilden is still able to provide a colorful history. Her husband Wade constructed their house standing adjacent to what was the train turntable. As the train conductor, Wade was able to attend to his duties in a moment's notice.

Fishing Businesses

Commercial fishing is in decline in Old Homosassa, leading to the possibility that these properties could face redevelopment to some other use if not protected and encouraged.



Hampton's Seafood

Hampton's Seafood

The Hampton's Fish House was built in the 1920's by Luther and Doc McReynolds. It was soon sold to T. L. Rogers who then passed the business to his sons, Buddy and Dick Loclar. The Locklears' family still owns the fish house and currently leases it to an independent fishing family.



Homosassa Seafood

Homosassa Seafood

Since the 1920's, a fish house has occupied the property where Homosassa Seafood stands today. Currently, the company maintains a large shrimping and crab fleet, selling wholesale.



Cedar Key Fish House

Cedar Key Fish House

Established in 1962 by Buck Sheppard and family, the Cedar Key Fish House has the reputation for introducing mullet and mullet roe to the world. Shrimp, stone crabs, oysters, scallops, and other fish are sold retail and wholesale. The family currently leases the fish house to another seafood company, Shrimps Landing.

Community Facilities

Old Homosassa is fortunate to have a number of community facilities. One of the community's goals is to preserve these facilities as part of Old Homosassa's character.



Homosassa Elementary

Homosassa Elementary School

Homosassa Elementary educates approximately 400 students in grades Kinderparten through 5th grade. Although the existing school was constructed in 1971, it is not the first Homosassa Elementary. Three schools are known to have existed in Old Homosassa prior to this one, the first one dating from 1882 on Gordy Island.



Homosassa Post Office

Post Office

The first Post Office was constructed on the north side of the river in 1880 and moved to the south side in 1913. Prior to the current location, a post office made of cabbage logs was constructed in 1948. Today's post office was constructed in 1968.



Homosassa Civic Club

Homosassa Civic Club

Founded in 1950, the Homosassa Civic Club constructed its clubhouse in 1957. Today, the clubhouse serves as headquarters for the club as well as a meeting place for community organizations.



Old Homosassa Public Library

Old Homosassa Library

Constructed in the late 1960's on property donated by the Homosassa Civic Club, the quaintness of Homosassa's public library is in keeping with the character of the town.



Picnic Area at Yulee Sugar Mill Ruins State Park

Yulee Sugar Mill Ruins State Historic Site

The Yulee sugar Mill Ruins were managed by the Citrus county Federation of Women's Club until they donated the land to the Florida Board of Parks and Historic Memorials on June 24, 1953. Today, this 4.49-acre site encompasses the Sugarmill ruins and a picnic area and is maintained by the Florida Division of Recreation and Parks.



Old Homosassa Firestation

Old Homosassa Fire Department

The Homosassa Volunteer Fire Department occupies a building constructed in 1964 and continues to provide services for the community.

Public Recreation

Two public recreation areas exist in Old Homosassa today, a State of Florida park and a Citrus County Boat Ramp. A future park is planned by the Civic Club in the Waterfront District.



Citrus County Public Boat Ramp

County Boat Ramp

Centered between MacRae's and the Riverside Resort is the County boat ramp. The established date of the boat ramp is unknown, but according to local historians "there has always been a public boat ramp." The County has recently constructed a parking facility for users of this boat ramp.



Homosassa Civic Club Park

Homosassa Civic Club Park

The Homosassa Civic Club Park is currently used for the annual Fish and Arts and Crafts estival and related parking.

Infrastructure

Water

Homosassa citizens receive public water service from the Homosassa Special Water District. The District serves a population of 4,567, including the Old Homosassa community. Pollution of private wells from septic systems is not an issue as long as residential properties are connected to this water system.

Sewer

There is no public sewer system. Most properties are served by private septic systems and, in some cases, environmentally unsound systems. A plan has been adopted to provide a central sewer line to the area. This plan is funded by Federal, State, and County monies. This endeavor is seen by some citizens as a “double-edged sword”, beneficial to the environment and water quality but encouraging more extensive development. Although a public sewer system is available on the north side of the Homosassa River, not all properties along this line are connected.

Stormwater Management

The lack of a stormwater management system in Old Homosassa causes local flooding and untreated water entering the river. In order to implement Policy 3.1.9, of the Citrus County Comprehensive Plan, regarding flooding in adjacent areas and pollution of water bodies, enhanced development standards are recommended. These enhanced development standards should address stricter fill limitations as is common in other waterfront communities.

Major Roadways

The Suncoast Parkway from Tampa to US Hwy 98 has recently been completed, providing improved access to Tampa

from the southern part of Citrus County. By connecting Old Homosassa to businesses in Tampa and the Tampa International Airport, this toll road is a major encouragement to development in the area. West Yulee Drive (CR-490) provides one of the community’s connections to US Hwy 19. The Citrus County Comprehensive Plan recommends upgrading a portion of this road to a four-lane divided highway.

Sidewalks

A sidewalk exists intermittently on the northern side of West Yulee Drive. It extends from the elementary school to near the Sugarmill State Park and is interrupted by several parking lots. Pedestrian connectivity is an important goal of the community and should be addressed by public and private development plans.

Envorinmental

All of the Homosassa lies in an environmentally sensitive coastal area. Moreover, most of area’s growth has been adjacent to the rivers, creeks, and wetlands. Goals, Objectives, and Policies for protecting this environment are included in the Citrus County Comprehensive Plan.

Water Quality

The quality of Homosassa’s water is paramount in retaining the natural habitats and aesthetic value that have long been associated with this community. Land use affects surface water in two ways: first, by increasing surface runoff, which increases flooding and stream degradation in down-stream areas; and second, by contributing pollutants such as oils, sediments, and heavy metals to stormwater runoff. Citizens need education about point pollution, such as septic systems, and non-point pollution, such as nitrates from fertilizers and stormwater runoff.

Wetlands

Protection of Homosassa’s wetlands has been a top issue for many of the town’s residents who believe that potential developments could disrupt or eliminate wetlands. Enhanced development standards and levels of public review are needed for these environmentally sensitive areas. The protection of natural wetland systems is necessary to maintain habitat for flora and fauna as well as to maintain water quality for future generations.

Manatees

The West Indian Manatee is a year-round inhabitant of the Homosassa River and draws tourists from all over the world. The Homosassa Springs State Wildlife Park is located in close proximity to Old Homosassa. It has the second highest traffic of any of the Florida State parks.