

**“Early Fishing Rancheros and Coastal Living before the Arrival of the Railroad:  
A History of Caladesi Island”**

*Remarks Delivered at the Dedication Ceremonies for the  
Daughters of the American Revolution Plaque at  
Caladesi Island State Park, Dunedin, Florida  
18 November 2013, 1:45 p.m.*

*by*

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This afternoon marks an important moment in the history of Caladesi Island, historic Hog Island, and Pinellas County. We have assembled here today to celebrate the historical significance of one of the most beautiful islands and beaches anywhere, and remember the pioneers who walked along this sandy shoreline long before homes dotted the mainland along Saint Joseph Sound or developers platted subdivisions along Mandalay Avenue with great ambition.

A few years ago, when Heritage Village in Largo revamped its master plan to describe important historical elements of the Pinellas experience, a category immediately selected was that of “coastal living.” Now, to many people today, “coastal living” implies a fun-and-sun lifestyle with nice homes—whether they are beach cottages or more elaborate dwellings—tall condominiums, fancy hotels, tourist destinations, and tasty restaurants. But to those who visited, homesteaded, and lived here in the years before the railroads and mosquito control, “coastal living” meant an entirely different thing: Isolation, remoteness, lots of mosquitoes and other pests, and very few visitors. Fresh water was collected via cisterns or from lakes and wells on the mainland. Long summers brought insufferable heat and humidity, punctuated by regular thunderstorms and sustained by infrequent shipments of supplies. In order to survive where we are today, in order to enjoy the postcard sunsets, one spent a lot of time searching for food and fixing their shelter. Despite these challenges, some did not just survive—they thrived.

Although hopes of finding gold for the Spanish crown brought early explorers to the area, the abundant wealth of the sea kept them returning. The Pánfilo de Narváez expedition of April 1528 included hundreds of men who arrived along

lower Pinellas at Jungle Prado and perhaps later traveled along the bays near Clearwater Harbor in search of gold. Hernando de Soto arrived near the mouth of Tampa Bay in May 1539 with nearly 600 men and 200 horses, probably passing through present-day Safety Harbor and upper Pinellas. A decade later, in June 1549, a Dominican friar named Luis Cancer de Barbastro came eastward from New Spain—present-day Mexico—with hopes of pacifying and converting natives in this area, but the Tocobagas wanted nothing to do with him and attacked his party. Spain established its first permanent settlement in *La Florida* at Saint Augustine in 1565 and began to develop a series of missions northward towards present-day Virginia and in the ‘big bend’ area of Florida. Most missions were far north and northeast of the Tampa Bay area. Although these early settlements appear in history books, other important areas where Spaniards and Indians once interacted have received less attention by the historical community.

During the 1700s and 1800s, and along both the Atlantic and Gulf coasts of Florida, Spaniards from Cuba established fishing rancheros. Itinerant rather than permanent, rarely charted and seldom documented, these coastal settlements offered a place for the Native Americans and Spaniards to engage in commercial trade, though most formed in an impromptu manner at a convenient location rather than as a fully planned enterprise sustained over a period of time. Seasonal in nature, somewhat like present-day snowbird migrations and farmer’s markets, these rancheros allowed indigenous and Spanish colonial populations to trade food and other commodities at a time when few settlers in Spanish *La Florida* lived south of a line from the big bend to Saint Augustine.

One of the biggest challenges in describing these Cuban finishing rancheros is that very little evidence of their existence remains, either in physical artifacts or written documents. Although maps of Florida’s west coast existed by 1700, storms and shifting sands reshaped the coastline of many islands along the Gulf Beaches. As most of you probably know, a single hurricane may reshape an entire island, as the “Gale of ‘48” did in September 1848 when it carved Johns Pass between Treasure Island and Madeira Beach and, much closer to where we are, as an October 1921 hurricane carved Hog Island into two separate islands—Caladesi and Honeymoon—separated by Hurricane Pass. Did fishing rancheros exist along the Pinellas coastline? Absolutely. Did Spaniards, Cubans, and perhaps others, such as Bahamians, anchor along Hog Island for fishing expeditions during the 1700s and 1800s? Certainly, they did. The problem we have is that shifting

sands, changing tides, and an absence of written documents make it impossible to verify any exact locations.

Since I cannot point to an exact spot and say with certainty that a fishing party smoked mullet there on a specific date, let me describe the nature of these rancheros from the historical fragments that exist at other locations. Most operated from the 1700s until the mid-1800s. The earliest ones, those from before the eighteenth century, attracted the interest of indigenous peoples, such as the Tocobaga, who were native to the area. As smallpox and other illnesses brought by the Europeans decimated the local populations, there was a time that these rancheros become more akin to fishing expeditions that harvested the abundance of seafood along inlets near Saint Joseph Sound, Boca Ciega Bay, and areas of Tampa Bay, rather than expeditions that also involved trade with Indians in the area. Abundant plant and wood sources allowed the Spaniards to smoke large quantities of fish, shellfish, and other food sources onsite, preserve them, and bring them back to Havana or other Caribbean destinations. Mullet, mullet roe, turtles, and other fish became important trade commodities. Sometimes, they would take their proceeds from selling their harvests and buy additional supplies to trade with locals and the occasional Indians living along the remote frontier.

The number of rancheros in the Tampa Bay region certainly increased after 1750, aided in part by a twenty-two day mapping expedition by Juan Baptista Franco in 1756 and a detailed follow-up survey to map the islands and waters in April 1757 by Don Francisco Maria Celi, a navigator for the royal Spanish fleet often credited for giving our county its name when he named the southern tip of the Pinellas mainland *Punta Pinal de Jiménez*, naming the “Point of Pines” in honor of his lieutenant, Don José Jiménez. Improved maps and navigational aids allowed expeditions to select better locations to capture larger harvests of fish as well as learn of notable freshwater resources, such as Mirror Lake in St. Petersburg, the former Lake Largo, and Lake Butler (now Lake Tarpon), as well as hundreds of other lakes and ponds and artesian sources, such as Wall Springs.

In Pinellas and other places towards southwest Florida, rancheros often appeared in close proximity to sites with Indian mounds. At these locations, small palm thatch huts were built, along with drying racks to smoke and preserve their harvests. In areas where Indians traded at the rancheros, they often brought

goods from the interior of the peninsula, including furs, deerskins, honey, and other products from the forest. Since these rancheros were subject to Spanish colonial trade policies, they often operated in a covert fashion, beyond the view of colonial administrators.

The first Spanish period came to an end in 1763, some 250 years after Juan Ponce de Leon first arrived along Florida's east coast. Although England took possession of Florida for more than two decades after defeating the French and Spanish in the Seven Years'—or French and Indian War—in 1763, England showed little interest in developing any settlements in the Tampa Bay region. Concentrating their efforts in what became the English Colony of East Florida at its headquarters in Saint Augustine, the lack of English in this area permitted Spanish and Cubans to continue to fish in the area with only minimal interruption during the period before and during the American Revolution, a time when East Florida and West Florida represented the fourteenth and fifteenth colonies—two that did not break away—as patriots led by George Washington and others to the north sought their independence from England.

By the second Spanish period, running from June 1784 when Spain regained administrative control of East Florida until the United States took possession of Florida after the ratification of the Adams-Onís Treaty in February 1821, some coastal fishing rancheros along Florida's west coast began to operate throughout the year. Others continued to operate seasonally after the United States took possession of Florida. According to early historian and land developer Walter Fuller, many of these fish rancheros operated from October or November through April out of palm thatch huts along the shoreline. Nearby, during the cooler months when fewer mosquitoes swarmed in the area, those living in the rancheros also grew fruit and harvested small gardens. Spaniards from Cuba, Indians, and even some African Americans operated these rancheros on an intermittent basis and with little interest in gaining attention. Sometimes, more than 200 people might assemble at these camps. As Seminole Indians came into Florida beginning in the mid-1700s, those living close to the coastline began to visit rancheros on occasion. Again, the specific presence of and locations of rancheros along Hog Island during this time is impossible to determine, but there is no doubt that small boats trolled the waters within a couple of miles of this spot to harvest seafood during this period, probably setting up camps along this

and other islands, as well as right along the mainland, to smoke their catches and prepare them for the journey back to Cuba or other Caribbean destinations.

A few rancheros continued to operate during the Florida territorial period from 1821 until 1845. One of the best known from this time operated in the area of present-day Tierra Verde by 1839. William Bunce, lived along an island (Palm Island/Cabbage Key/Pine Key) that became part of Tierra Verde. Bunce's Pass between Shell Key and Mullet Key (Fort DeSoto Park) was named after him. Bunce originally settled on the island in 1835 or 1836 after operating fishing rancheros along the Gulf coast. According to Fuller, Bunce was the only American citizen who operated a rancho in this area. This site actually attracted some attention in October 1840, as much of the Florida peninsula was in a state of lock-down during the Second Seminole War, a military campaign between 1835 and 1842 to remove the Seminoles who had started coming to Florida a century earlier, as well as to repatriate some of the runaway slaves living close to or alongside the Seminoles. Although trade with Indians frequently occurred at rancheros during the Spanish period, Americans feared that Bunce was trading with Spaniards and their Seminole Indian allies during a time of war. Troops from Fort Brooke, near Tampa, came down to the mouth of Tampa Bay to attack Bunce's rancho. Although portions were used briefly after the war ended in 1842, by most accounts, the 1848 hurricane destroyed Bunce's rancho.

Although a few settlements such as Fort Harrison appeared along the bluffs of Clearwater around 1841, we cannot pinpoint the exact location of any rancheros that existed at that point in time along Caladesi and Honeymoon islands. However, itinerant fishing parties did camp along these island near the mangroves, sometimes in search of safe harbor and other times to harvest a particularly rich area of the coastline and fill their nets with fish. These statements are historically accurate, even with a lack of documentary source materials.

In addition to the fear of building trade relationships with the Seminoles, the United States had another reason for wanting to shut down the rancheros: The Cubans and others operating these outposts on American soil sent hundreds of tons of fish and other products to Havana and other places outside of the United States annually, and nearly all of the economic benefit of these operations went elsewhere, while revenue and customs agents barely collected a dime. Since these rancheros were sites where Spaniards, Indians, and blacks often traded with

one-another and occasionally intermarried, they also posed a problem in a Southern state with an expanding slave economy. One could make a strong argument that while slavery was becoming more important in areas around Tallahassee and the Panhandle by the 1840s, in many areas of peninsular Florida, the rancheros still dominated the economy of remote outposts. This had to end.

And it did. By the beginning of the Civil War in 1861, after Florida had seceded from the Union to join the Confederacy, American General Winfield Scott launched his Anaconda Plan, a brilliant strategy to blockade the Confederate coastlines and later bisect the eastern and western Confederacy by controlling the lower Mississippi River. Any remnants of rancheros along the Pinellas peninsula became obvious targets of destruction. Although fishing camps did exist during the years after the Civil War, the ancestral connection between such camps and Cuba had largely come to an end.

By the late 1800s, the popularity of plume hats in northern cities brought new hunters to the Florida coastline. Although the plume hunting of the Everglades and the widespread decimation of flamingoes and other birds and their rookeries in southwestern Florida has received the bulk of the attention, hunting along the Gulf Beaches in the Tampa Bay area also occurred and hunters reduced local populations. No doubt, some of the hunting took place along or in close proximity to Hog Island.

More than twenty years later, when Harry Scharrer, a native of Switzerland, arrived at Hog Island after setting sail from Tampa and running into a storm near Dunedin Pass, he landed on an uninhabited island. However, this island—now Caladesi—was not lacking in history at all. Under the sands, washed away by the tides, footprints of Spaniards and Indians long gone but that we cannot forget demonstrate the significance of early fishing outposts and rancheros along the coast. Indeed, as Mr. Scharrer gained title to the island and started his family, the Scharrer family added their history to the next chapter of this island's story.

I have enjoyed sharing these comments about the fishing rancheros of our area. Although much of their history remains the product of speculation rather than research, their story is an important one in the early years of human settlement along the Pinellas Gulf Beaches. Thank you for allowing me to share my comments.