

# FLORIDA & NAPLES

## COMMUNITY PROFILE

Naples is one of Florida's loveliest coastal communities, with pristine beaches providing boating, fishing, shell collecting and sunbathing. Cultural activities, golf and tennis tournaments, and exquisite shops are all a part of life in Naples. Art galleries offer superb exhibits, and some of the area restaurants are known throughout Florida. Naples' miles of beaches are on the mainland and are among the safest in the world. The city itself contains many miles of navigable waterways which are connected to the Gulf of Mexico.

## ICE AGE TO THE 1990s

Over 20 million years ago, Florida was just beginning to rise out of the ocean, so say the scientists. Changes in tidal current -- about the time of the Ice Age -- started a build up of land, known as Florida. Interestingly enough, our first winter visitors weren't from the Midwest or New England. Rather, they were rhinoceroses, camels, saber-toothed tigers, mastodons, llamas and crocodiles. Although Florida's archeological history dates back over 10,000 years, an explorer named Juan Ponce de Leon was the one who really got it started in 1513.

In the early days of exploration, a king would send someone out to unknown territory. They would draw a map, name it and return to the king, who claimed the land for his own. Sounds a little far fetched, but that is exactly what happened with Florida [and a large portion of the New World].

Over 400 years ago, Ponce de Leon ventured beyond the "edge" and landed at what he thought was Bimini, naming it *La Florida* in honor of the Easter Festival of Flowers in Spain. A few days later, on April 2, he took a side trip and landed near St. Augustine. A map was drawn, claiming Florida [and land as far north as Labrador] for the Spanish crown.

On a subsequent visit, Ponce de Leon attempted to establish a Gulf Coast colony between Sarasota and Fort Myers, but to no avail. Some time later, Hernando De Soto tried too, but the Calusa Indians prevailed [most of the time] for over 100 years against intruders who attempted to take over what is now

Sarasota, Fort Myers, and Naples.

To keep Florida's history in perspective, it is helpful to realize that Florida was discovered 107 years before the pilgrims landed at Jamestown. During the first 250 years following Florida's discovery, Spain controlled most of the land. But the French and English also laid claim to parts of Florida. Of course, this led to conflicts among the countries as well as with more than 100,000 Indians who are estimated to have lived in Florida at the time.

During the 1700s and 1800s, the more colorful version of the Gulf Coast's history tells the story of an era of varmints. Engaged in trade, fishing, cattle and some not so legitimate activities, the area was taken over by schemers, scoundrels and other unsavory characters. The bayous and estuaries of Fort Myers and Naples were favorite hideouts for bootleggers, smugglers and pirates. Jose Gaspar, Calico Jack, Jean La Fitte, Bru Baker, and Black Caesar are but a few of the names battered around by storytellers.

Gaspar, one of the more celebrated pirates, maintained his "headquarters" on Gasparilla Island, now known as Boca Grande. Besides being a pirate, legend has it that he liked to "capture" the loveliest and wealthiest of women [and whiskey] from passing ships, only to detain them on another Gulf Coast island called "Captiva" Island [of course] until ransom arrived.

The development of Old Naples began in the late 19th century after General John S. Williams and Walter N. Haldeman sailed through Gordon Pass into Naples Bay. General Williams is credited with naming the area "Naples" after the Bay of Naples in Italy.

Heading a group of families from Kentucky and Ohio, the two formed the Naples Town Improvement Company. At this time, Naples was beginning to attract tourists - mostly wealthy yachtsmen who would live on their boats while hunting and fishing in the nearby territory.

By 1887 two frame houses had been built for Haldeman and Williams and streets and building plots were chartered. With the only access being by water, the Naples Pier along with the Naples Hotel were constructed in 1889. Residents began to cluster their

houses around these landmarks, paying \$10 per lot. The town was still relatively undeveloped, the Tamiami Trail ended in Estero, and travelers had to use boats or ox carts to venture up the coast.

In 1911, Tennessee-born Barron G. Collier, for whom the county one day would be named, came to Florida. Owner of a successful trolley car advertising franchise, Collier completed the Tamiami Trail (U.S. Highway 41) project in 1928 with the aid of the state of Florida to connect smaller towns of the Gulf Coast and to link Tampa to Miami. This resulted in a significant boost in traffic for trade and tourism. By the 1930's Collier had acquired some 900,000 acres of land within the county, including the majority of Marco Island.

The Naples Beach Hotel became the active social center. With its white clapboards and gracious porches, the three-story hotel represented a golden era in America's history and played host to many celebrities including Thomas Edison, Gary Cooper, Gertrude Lawrence, and Daphne Du Maurier.

In 1922, the Old Naples Building was erected and has served a variety of purposes over the decades; as the first town hall, the first bus depot, the first drugstore, doctor's office and clinic, and a branch of the County Courthouse. Two railroads completed lines to the area in 1927, and the first Chamber of Commerce began in 1928. The county had incorporated in 1923, the city in 1925.

The prominence of Edison, Ford and Firestone as well as the fame and fortune of the DuPonts, Mellons and Vanderbilts accelerated the discovery of the Gulf Coast, particularly during the Great Florida Land Boom of the 1920s. Thousands of speculators and new residents bought land, built houses and discovered paradise on some of the most sybaritic beaches in America.

In 1946, Aqualane Shores emerged, followed by Port Royal. In that year, Julius "Junky" Fleischmann visited for the first time, by 1952 had formed Neapolitan Enterprises, and began developing the commercial district. The first bank to be established in the area was the Bank of Naples in 1949.

Today, old Naples, - which is on the National Register of

Historic Places - is one of the last remaining communities along the Gulf of Mexico which has retained many of its original structures. Most importantly, the quality of life that was sought by the early pioneers continues to be enjoyed by many of their descendants. Collier County today is a thriving, enviable community, combining attractive growth with preservation of the natural environment that has since the earliest times drawn countless visitors with its beauty.

For more than 50 years, Tamiami Trail remained as the major north-south route for the Gulf Coast, accommodating crowd-weary visitors and residents who avoided Southeast Florida. During the 1980s, air service was greatly enhanced with the completion of the Southwest Florida International Airport, and Tamiami Trail was replaced with I-75 as the major transportation route of the Gulf Coast [linking Maine to Miami]. The completion of these facilities and the growth of the area have resulted in the recent establishment of Florida's newest state university, Florida Gulf Coast University, just a few miles from Naples.

Just as the railroad and Tamiami Trail ushered in a new era for Naples, these recent accomplishments are expected to do the same, but with the benefit of the lessons of the past and a new concern for the environment and quality of life of the future. With some care, it will be every bit as exciting and dynamic.