

The Weedon Island Story



A Pinellas County Government Program

The Weedon Island Story

Third Edition

Pinellas County
Department of Environmental Management
Environmental Lands Division
Tarpon Springs • Florida

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WEEDON ISLAND PRESERVE

Weedon Island Preserve, at approximately 3,700 acres, lies along the shoreline of Tampa Bay and is managed by Pinellas County Department of Environmental Management's Environmental Lands Division. The Division is responsible for more than 15,000 acres of preserves and management areas. These are designated wild lands managed for conservation, protection and enhancement of natural and cultural resources, and passive recreational uses in accordance with approved management plans. The protection of these natural areas is possible only through the continued support of Pinellas County and its citizens.

While only a portion of Weedon Island Preserve's colorful and varied history is captured within the following pages, readers will find this collection of stories interesting and informative. A visit to the Weedon Island Preserve Cultural and Natural History Center, the Preserve's on-site educational center, is a must for visitors seeking to learn more about the cultural and natural history of the area. Weedon Island Preserve is truly "A Place to Remember."

Weedon Island Preserve Cultural and Natural History Center

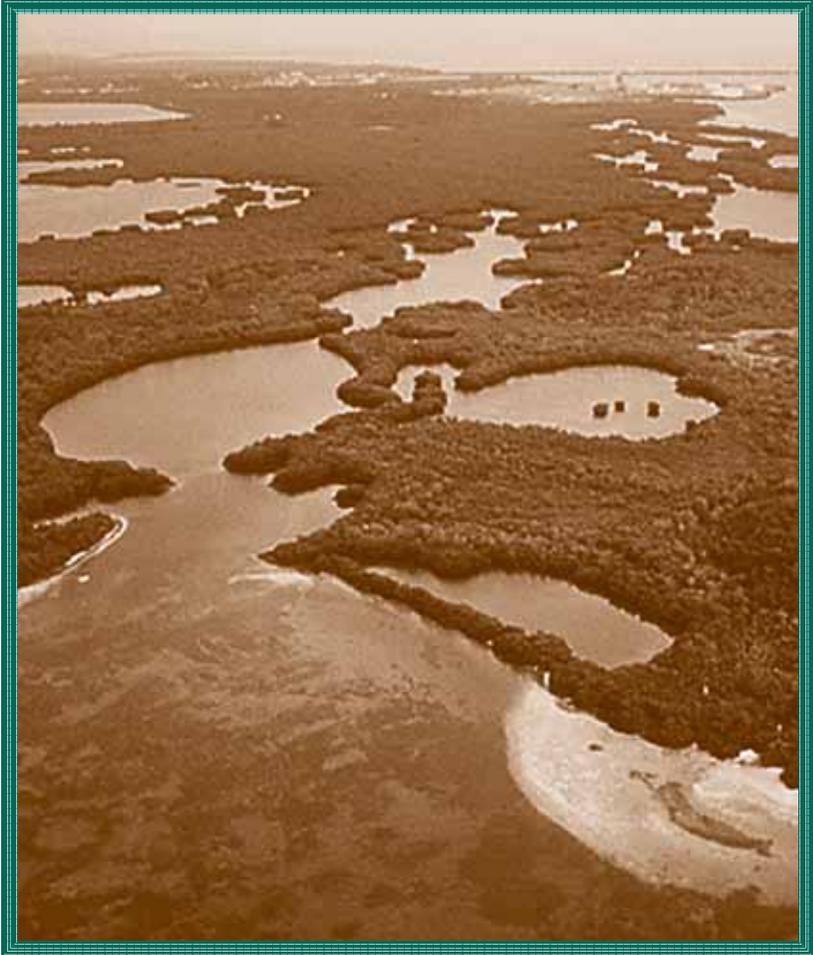


The Center's mission is to interpret the natural, cultural and archaeological history of the Preserve in order to demonstrate how the environment and people support and shape each other.

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Photograph by ELD Staff.

Aerial view looking north over Weedon Island Preserve.

PREFACE

To manage an area in its natural state, we must evaluate current conditions and understand how historical activities and events impacted the land. If we do not look to the past, we cannot see into the future.

The story of Weedon Island Preserve is an old one and it continues. This work is based on available factual information. However, as the title of this book implies, some information is incidental and speculative. Part of Weedon Island's history is told in old newspaper articles and other Tampa Bay area periodicals. But much of the information contained in the following pages comes from oral history conveyed by individuals with first-hand knowledge of events at Weedon Island. Therefore, this narrative includes some supposition, local legend and memories of those who witnessed long-ago events.

Nearly two years were spent researching the first edition of this story. The original intent was simple - to discover why pine trees were absent on the south half of the island (this is answered later in the story). This question led to another, and to another, and before long, the history of the area began to unfold. Much of the research involved simple, and sometimes not so simple, detective work to locate individuals able to share their knowledge of past events and people.

Many people helped along the journey and should be recognized with deepest gratitude for their contributions. Harold Anderson, Sylvia Johnson, Maxine Lee, Lettie Benjamin Muench, Eric Peterson, Tom Todd, and Nancy Trener all provided valuable anecdotal information that helped bring the story of Weedon Island alive. A special thanks is extended to Mary Weedon Keen and her daughter Mary Leslie Olson for their contributions. Former State Representative Jim Robinson, local collector Brian Evenson, and Pinellas County Commissioner Barbara Sheen Todd gave generously of their time and knowledge to answer questions and provide helpful suggestions. Ray Robinson, past president of the Suncoast Archaeological Society, contributed significantly with his expert attention to the sections on the Native American cultures of the island. Thanks are also extended to Elizabeth Neily for the illustrations.

Weedon Island Preserve's journey continues.

Keith H. Thompson, Jr.
Preserve Supervisor

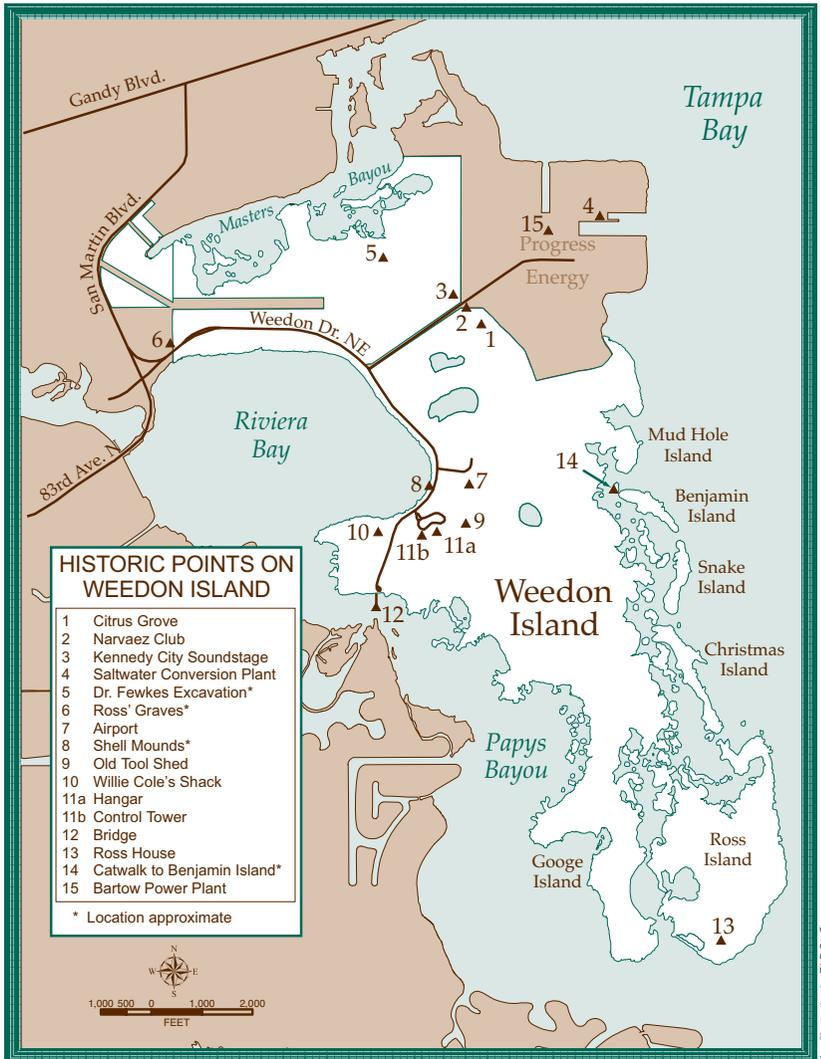


Figure 1. Location of historic points on Weedon Island Preserve.

Map illustration by ELD Staff.

INTRODUCTION

Weedon Island Preserve, and its associated historic points (Figure 1), is located along the northwest shore of Old Tampa Bay in Pinellas County. Today, the Preserve includes approximately 3,700 acres with more than half lying north of Gandy Boulevard. The remainder of the Preserve, and the focus of this story, lies to the south. Weedon Island, what was once perhaps a true island, is now a low-lying peninsula surrounded by several small islands including Benjamin, Snake, Christmas, and Ross Islands. Over the past 60 years, land bridges formed between Weedon Island and Mud Hole and Googe Islands, two previously distinct islands. This part of the Preserve is flat except where Indian mounds occur. Some mounds were built on relict dune ridges and continue to be the highest elevations of the Preserve.

The majority of Weedon Island Preserve consists of mangrove swamps (Figure 2). However, the uplands include xeric hammocks, pine/scrubby flatwoods, and ruderal communities. The following environment descriptions are based on the Florida Natural Areas Inventory (FNAI 1990) land use classification system. This system identifies natural lands based on the assemblages of plants, animals, fungi, and microorganisms as well as physical attributes of the environment. The last three environment descriptions listed are not included in the FNAI classification system but are important environments to mention.

FNAI Marine and Estuary Lands:

Tidal Swamps are also called mangrove forests and are found along the shoreline where wave energy is low. These coastal communities are ecologically important as primary nursery grounds for many fish and shellfish and provide breeding and foraging grounds for many wading birds, shorebirds, and other organisms. Tidal swamps also provide coastline stability. Red, black and white mangroves dominate this community.

Tidal Marshes are found on Ross Island and the mainland of Weedon Island Preserve. These areas are protected by and blend into adjacent tidal swamps. Typical vegetation includes black needle rush, smooth cordgrass, glassworts, and saltworts. Snails, spiders, fiddler crabs, diamondback terrapin, wading birds, rails, and raccoons are common inhabitants.

Seagrass Beds occur in clear, shallow coastal waters where wave action is moderate. Seagrasses are not true grasses but are angiosperms (flowering plants) that exist as pure or mixed stands. In Florida, turtle grass, manatee grass, and shoal grass are the three most common species. Since epiphytic algae and invertebrates cling to leaf blades, seagrass beds are important food sources for manatee, marine turtles and many fish. Other marine organisms such as clams, scallops, sea urchins, and small juvenile fish find shelter within dense seagrass beds.

Mollusk Reefs include oyster bars or shellfish beds that form on hard substrate. While the American oyster is the most common mollusk found in these beds, other sessile and benthic invertebrates like mussels, clams, barnacles, and lightning whelk also are present. Shorebirds, wading birds, raccoons, and other animals frequently visit exposed oyster beds at low tide.

Unconsolidated Substrates are offshore sandbars or mud flats, which are home to sand dollars, mollusks, crabs, tubeworms, and other organisms. Because these areas are free of vegetation, they also are popular with recreational boaters. However, even though these bars look barren, the density of organisms buried within the sand can reach tens of thousands per square meter. This makes them popular feeding grounds for many shorebirds.

FNAI Terrestrial Lands:

Pine/Scrubby Flatwoods dominate the Preserve's uplands. These communities have been grouped together because fire frequency and drainage alterations have made them difficult to distinguish in the field. The few mesic pine flatwoods that occur on the Preserve approach a more dry, xeric condition, a characteristic indicative of scrubby flatwoods. Underlying soils on the Preserve are those usually associated with scrubby flatwoods. Dominant vegetation found in these communities includes slash pine, wiregrass, saw palmetto, and rusty lyonia.

Maritime Hammocks develop just inland of the coast in a narrow band of dense hardwoods. The wind-pruned contour of live oaks, cabbage palms and redbays deflects strong hurricane winds, thereby reducing the chance of trees becoming uprooted. Squirrel tree frogs, rat snakes and gray squirrels are common. American holly, sea grape, saw palmetto, and beautybush are common species of vegetation.

Xeric Hammocks are mature forests that form in areas protected from fire for 30 years or more. Sometimes called oak hammocks, the overstory canopy is dominated by a myriad of oaks including live oak, sand live oak, laurel oak, and many more. Saw palmetto, sparkleberry, American holly, beautyberry, and persimmon are typical plants. Black racers, screech owls and gray squirrels are common residents. Since xeric hammocks form on old sand dunes, the soils below consist of deep, well-drained sands. On the Preserve, xeric hammocks are found on Googe and Ross Islands.

Coastal Berms are sometimes called shell ridges or mangrove hammocks. They are mounds of sand, shell and storm-deposited debris that run parallel to the shoreline. Vegetation ranges from dense thickets of large shrubs and small trees to sparse shrubs and xerophytic plants. Six-lined racerunners, red-winged blackbirds, savannah sparrows, and raccoons are found among common plants, which include cabbage palm, sea grape, marsh elder, wax myrtle, live oak, sea purslane, sea oats, and muhly grass. Coastal berms and shell mounds are sometimes difficult to distinguish from one another.

Shell Mounds are human-made piles of shells, resulting from the activities of early Native Americans. Sometimes called middens or Indian mounds, these are elevated sites on which a hardwood, closed canopy community develops. Typical plants include cabbage palm, live oak, hackberry, red cedar, coral bean, marlberry, and coontie. Because the underlying shells are loosely aggregated, water tends to run through very quickly. The calcareous substrate of the mound, coupled with its close proximity to the coast, often allows tropical or subtropical species of plants to grow further north. Shell mounds are archaeological remains and, on the Preserve, they are protected from damage by artifact-seekers by local, state, and federal laws.

FNAI Palustrine Lands:

Depression Marshes, also called isolated freshwater wetlands or flatwood ponds, are shallow depressions in sand substrates with herbaceous vegetation. Water is present at all times in the 4.5-acre depression marsh located on the Preserve. St. John's wort, yellow-eyed grass, willows, bloodroot, buttonbush, pickerelweed, arrowhead, and bladderwort are common plants found in this community. Because of their isolation, depression marshes are very important for breeding and foraging striped newts, oak toads, pinewoods tree frogs, squirrel tree frogs, white ibis, wood storks, and sandhill cranes.

Other Lands:

Salterns are located near the coast. The flatness across tidelands is formed by the daily ebb flow of the tide, which acts as a leveling agent. Salterns form when sand is deposited from adjacent uplands during storms. The slight increase in elevation of a saltern is high enough for tidal inundations, but they occur at a reduced frequency compared to the adjacent seaward zones. Long periods between flooding, coupled with the loss of water through evaporation and percolation, results in relatively dry area with high concentrations of salt in the soil. Salterns, also known as salt barrens, are sparsely vegetated with salt tolerant plants such as sea purslane. Sightings of fiddler crabs and foraging shorebirds are common on salterns.

Ruderal actually describes plants that grow in areas once highly disturbed by humans. The 1.5-acre area where the airport once stood remains disturbed and is dominated by Bahia grass, lantanas, grape vines and sensitive plants. Underlying Immokalee fine sand soils indicate this area could possibly be restored to a native pine flatwoods community.

Developed areas are places currently disturbed by human activity. At present, developed portions of the Preserve cover nine acres and include roads, launch sites, picnic areas, and the lands supporting the infrastructure of the Preserve.

Together these natural and disturbed surroundings provide important ecological resources. Today the Preserve is managed to protect valuable ecosystems while supporting passive recreation. But that has not always been the case, as told by the history of Weedon Island Preserve and the long struggle for its protection.

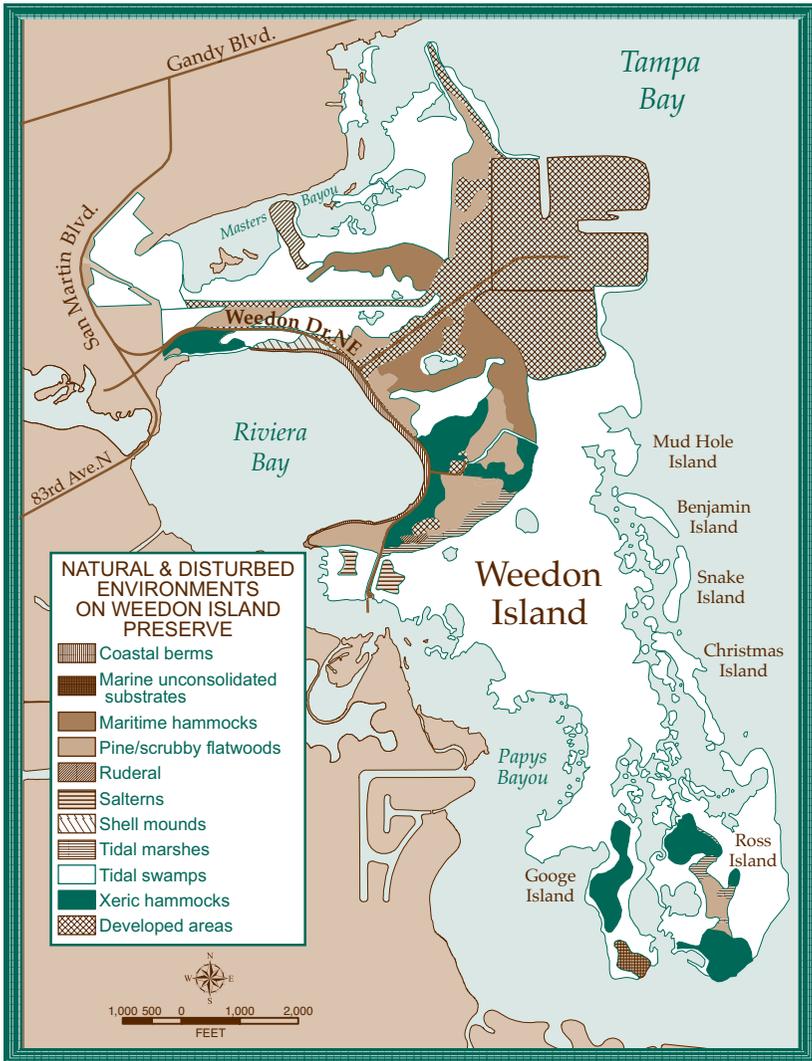


Figure 2. Map illustrating the various natural and disturbed environments of Weedon Island Preserve. Mollusk reefs, seagrass beds and depression marshes are not shown.

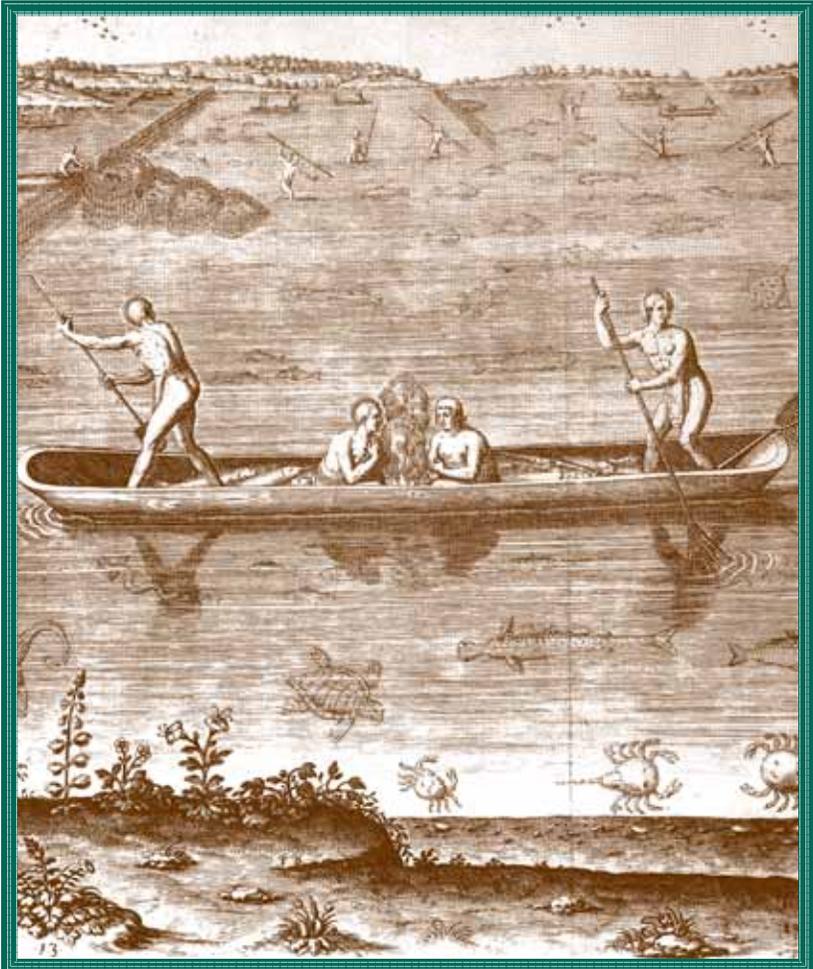


Image courtesy of Fundaburk (1959).

An image of southeastern Indians fishing. This illustration is a reproduction of an engraving by Theodore de Bry (1590) of a watercolor originally done by John White (1585).

THE EARLIEST ISLAND DWELLERS

Current evidence indicates the earliest human inhabitants of North America migrated over a land bridge that connected Asia to Alaska during the late Pleistocene period. Hunting large game, these Paleoindian migrating tribes gradually moved southward and by 12,000 to 15,000 years ago reached the Florida peninsula. Florida was cooler and drier during this time and quite different than it appears today. Sea level was much lower and the shoreline extended many miles out into the Gulf of Mexico.

Three timeframes that occurred in the prehistoric period prior to the arrival of the Europeans are the Paleoindian, Archaic, and Woodland periods. Dredge material containing diagnostic points from inundated marsh, riverine and coastal environments that make up the Tampa Bay region suggests an early Paleoindian presence. The Archaic Period began about 10,000 years ago and was characterized by an increasing adaptation to warmer, wetter climate. The people of the Early Archaic period, 8000 – 5000 Before Common Era (BCE), gradually adapted to a more sedentary life that included hunting and fishing.

There are strong indicators of human occupation on Weedon Island by the Middle Archaic period (5000 - 3000 BCE). These “indicators”, or objects, are the material culture left behind by early island inhabitants. Newnan and Florida Stemmed Archaic points, scrapers, knives, drills, and hammerstones are some of the stone artifacts found at Weedon Island. The debitage (debris) from their tool making can be found scattered in the upland areas and on the pair of curved relict dune ridges that form the backbone of the Weedon Island Preserve. During this time rising waters formed the complex of islands, bays and bayous as we know them today.

Pottery began to appear in the Late Archaic Period (3000 – 500 BCE). Although early investigations did not recover any fiber-tempered pottery, recent excavation of a small coastal hamlet adjacent to the northern tract of the Weedon Island Preserve recovered artifacts from the Manasota culture that evolved from the earlier Archaic cultures. The people of the Manasota culture adapted well to the rich coastal environment of Tampa Bay. Great piles of discarded shells grew on the island as the Indians helped themselves to the vast bounty of the estuary. Their early settlement middens gave archaeologists

a great deal of information about their lifestyles from the objects and food remains they discarded. The rich estuary of Tampa Bay provided fish, shellfish, turtle, wild game, and plants. Archaeological evidence shows many tools fashioned from stone and shell, such as hammers, awls, axes, knives, and points.

The importance of this small coastal hamlet, known as the Yat Kitischee site became more significant when the investigation revealed it to be occupied for many years and coincided with the time frame of the extensive ceremonial complex located on the main portion of Weedon Island. This knowledge gave added understanding of the Yat Kitischee people and their affiliation to the people of the main complex site at Weedon Island. This site, on the National Register of Historic Places, is the type-site of the Weeden Island culture that extends from the central Gulf coast area into north Florida, Georgia and Alabama.

As the early Weedon Islanders thrived and multiplied, their culture grew in complexity and sophistication. This was evidenced by their artistic, well-made pottery, their modes of burial, and the associated goods that were interred with the deceased. They built their houses with poles and covered them with palm fronds. Dugout canoes used in transportation were made from carefully burned out pine logs.

Regional cultures of the Tampa Bay area dominated the prehistory of Florida with two major centers of political, ceremonial and social significance that developed on the Pinellas Peninsula: the Weeden (alternate spelling) Island and Safety Harbor cultures. Jesse Walter Fewkes, Director of the Bureau of Ethnology at the Smithsonian Institution, named the culture he investigated in the 1920s after its location on Weedon Island. Its distinctive and ornate pottery and associated rituals and religious beliefs have generated thousands of articles detailing sites that identify with the Weeden Island Culture. The confusion of the spelling of Weedon-Weeden resulted from the Fewkes Smithsonian publication with its misspelling. In all fairness, numerous articles published about the finds in the local papers also misspelled the island name.

Today, archaeologists divide the Weeden Island Culture into two periods that occurred within the latter part of the Woodland period (1,000 BCE – 900 Common Era (CE)). During the Weeden Island I period (200 – 700 CE), pottery was characterized by effigies, punctated, incised, plain or complicated stamped designs. Pottery designs from the Weeden Island II period (700 – 900/1000 CE) illustrate plain and check stamped patterns. The Weeden Island site encompassed both periods and also included the early Safety Harbor cultural period that began in 900 CE.

By the early 1500s, Spanish explorers reached the central Gulf coast area. Much speculation surrounds the exact location of their landing site. Despite many tales, no verified documentation exists of European contact at Weeden Island. In his 1924 report, Fewkes stated, “No object of European manufacture has been found in the Weeden graveyard.” Fewkes went on to hypothesize about the ancestry of the early Weeden peoples.

Many unanswered questions remain about the prehistoric presence at Weeden Island. Future archaeological investigations at the Preserve may someday reveal new facts that will advance our knowledge of these ancient peoples.



Illustration by Elizabeth Neely

Wood stork in flight.



Image courtesy of Fundaburk (1988).

Europeans and native Indians meet. This image is a reproduction of an engraving by Theodore de Bry (1591) of a painting originally done by Jacques le Moyne de Morques (1588).

THE SPANISH ARRIVE

The fate of the prehistoric natives who flourished along the Gulf coast and throughout Florida took a disastrous turn with the arrival of Europeans, though the Indians did not easily yield to foreign domination. Juan Ponce de Leon is considered to have been the first European to visit Florida. He sighted its coastline in 1513, but the Indians kept him from occupying the land and claiming it for Spain. Ponce de Leon died in Cuba in 1521 from a wound he received in an Indian battle along the west coast of Florida.

On April 15, 1528, a small fleet of ships approached the Charlotte Harbor - Tampa Bay area from the south. The three ships and the three hundred soldiers aboard were part of a Spanish mapping expedition bound for Florida. The leader of the flotilla was Panfilo de Narvaez.

Narvaez was one of the first Spanish explorers of the west coast of Florida. He was part of a two-pronged mapping expedition in which one group mapped the east coast while Narvaez and his group mapped the west coast. History has long been cloudy on where he landed although many historians believe it was Tampa Bay.

According to Spanish archives, Narvaez met a large group of Indians on his arrival. There were several settlements along the bay. Spanish records indicate that it took two days of working the high tides to get the ships into the bay; this fact has led some researchers to suggest that Narvaez landed in the Charlotte Harbor area rather than in the deeper Tampa Bay area (Figure 3). It now appears that the remaining members of the Narvaez expedition departed Florida from an area south of Tallahassee and were shipwrecked on the Texas coast, from which a few survivors reached Mexico.

In September 1528, a relief force was sent to look for the Narvaez party. What they found was that the chief of the Uzita natives, Chief Harrihiqua, had not forgotten the cruelty of the last white men he met. Four men were sent ashore in a small boat. Once they made shore, three were killed on the spot. The chief's daughter saved one man, Juan Ortiz. According to the legend, Chief Harrihiqua gave Ortiz to her for a servant.

Ortiz lived with the Indians and took on their dress and customs. He learned their language and was tattooed like them. Then, in May 1539, Hernando de Soto landed in the Charlotte Harbor – Tampa Bay area near the Little Manatee River although his exact landing place is also in question. Some of de Soto's scouts were exploring the area when they came across Ortiz and eleven Indians. The scouts attacked and killed all but Ortiz, who saved his own life by pleading in Spanish, "Do not kill me; I am a Christian." Ortiz was taken to de Soto and told him of the battle of Narvaez and his men. He then explained how he had come to live with the Indians eleven years prior.

Fearing a similar outcome, de Soto used Ortiz to mediate a truce so that he and his men could pass through the area. This did de Soto little good because once he left the area, other Indians picked off his men one by one as the expedition made its way north. Although de Soto and his men captured and killed Indians throughout the territory, they found a formidable opponent in these natives who hid behind trees and bushes and then retreated into the woods where Spanish horsemen were ineffective.

The story of Ortiz and of the battles between Indians and Europeans on or around the Tampa Bay area is part of early Spanish documents and probably contains some elements of fact although no doubt embellished by the early explorers and historical chroniclers.

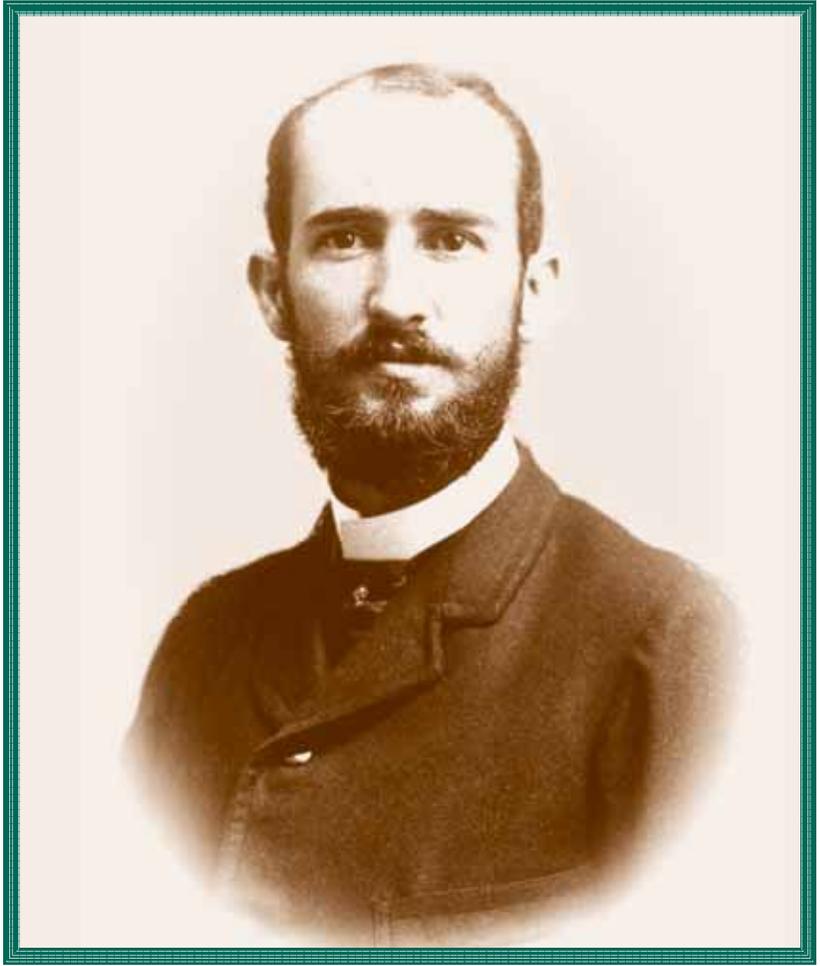
The Europeans not only fought the Indians but also battled each other for control of Florida. The Spanish, French and British each tried to colonize the territory, which did not become part of the United States until 1845. All the wars over the Florida territory, however, left the native culture the tragic loser. Native populations declined precipitously.

Smallpox, yellow fever, venereal diseases, and war led to the demise of the native population. The few survivors are reported to have been shipped to Cuba or became part of the Seminole culture, a group of Indians who had been displaced from their lands by white settlers and migrated into Florida from Georgia.



Map illustration by ELD Staff.

Figure 3. Tampa Bay and Charlotte Harbor, Florida.



Photograph courtesy of Mary Weedon Keen.

Dr. Leslie Washington Weedon, (1860 – 1937).

THE ISLAND GETS ITS NAME

Hostilities between the Indians and white settlers are as significant a part of Florida's history as they are for the history of the United States. In 1824, the U.S. Government built Fort Brooke in Tampa as a supply depot and staging area to control the Seminoles in western Florida. That sparked a population surge in the area of present-day Tampa.

Lorenzo Dow Ross was born in Florida in 1836, most likely in or around Fort Brooke. At the same time, 452 people lived in the area, including 287 soldiers. One of the Preserve's islands, Ross Island, still bears his name. Other local residents left an indelible mark on local history through having terrain features named for them. One such person was Charles Papy, for whom both Papy's Bayou and Papy's Point are named.

In 1856, Lorenzo joined the United States Army and fought in the "Indian Wars." Even though the Second Seminole War (1835-1842) had been over for some time, fighting still occurred in the Everglades. After he was discharged from the Army, Lorenzo moved to the Pinellas Peninsula where he farmed potatoes and corn. Records indicate he was one of 381 people who lived on the Peninsula, which later became Pinellas County in 1912.

During the Civil War on March 10, 1862, Lorenzo enlisted in the Confederate Army and joined Company B of the Seventh Florida Infantry. Charles Papy also "mustered in" with the same company. On July 5, 1862, Lorenzo was promoted to Sergeant, and his unit fought alongside the Confederate Army of Tennessee. Lorenzo was captured at Missionary Ridge on November 25, 1863; he was taken prisoner and held until June 20, 1865. Of the five hundred men of the Seventh Florida Infantry, only a handful lived to see the end of the war. Upon his release, Lorenzo returned to the Pinellas Peninsula and started a family.

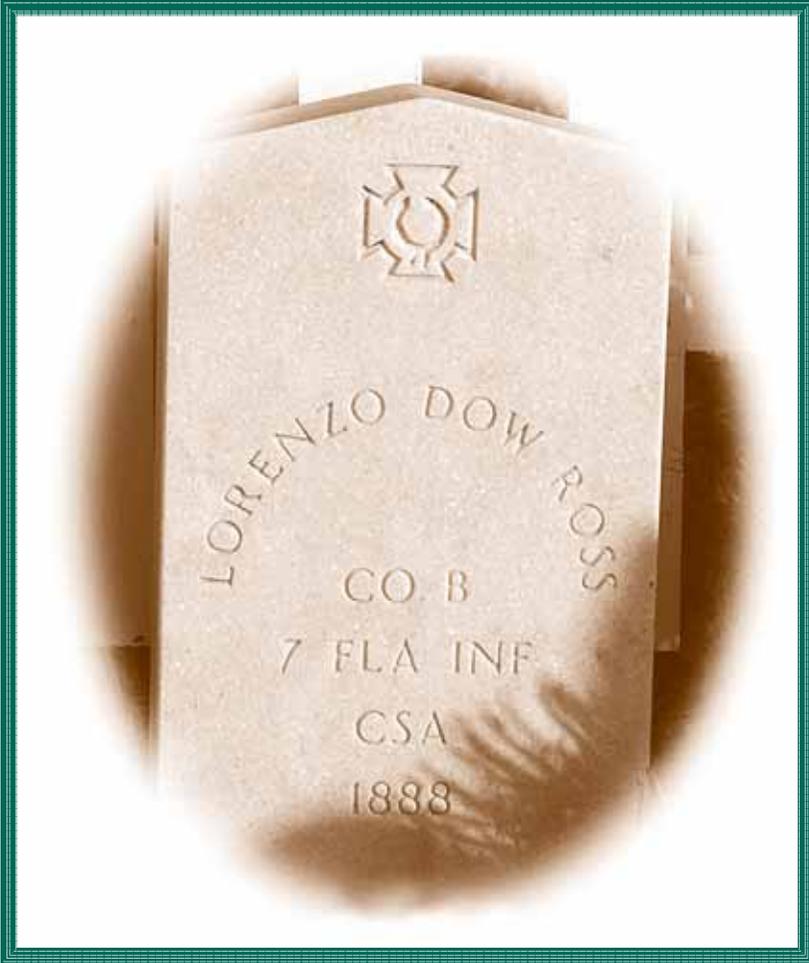
On January 28, 1866, Lorenzo married Inez Hart. Her father, Elias Joseph Hart, was the first person to claim land under the Armed Occupation Act of 1842. Elias' father, Isaiah, was the founder of Jacksonville, Florida; Elias' uncle, Ossian B. Hart, was governor of Florida from 1873 until his death in 1874.

Lorenzo moved his new bride to the southern tip of the island that soon came to be known as Ross Island. Their union produced six children. The first, Frank Percy Ross, was born in December 1868. Percy died in a hunting accident on the island in 1886. He was buried on the family property on the northeast side of Weedon Island; the grave was later relocated to the northwest side of the island. Lorenzo died in 1888 of food poisoning and was buried next to his son. After Lorenzo's death, Inez moved from the island and settled in the area of Jensen Beach, Florida until her death in April 1942.

During the same year Percy Ross died, 1886, a former Confederate cavalry officer, Captain W. B. Henderson, used his war bonds to buy the property to be known as Weedon Island. When his daughter Blanche married Leslie Weedon, a doctor from Tampa, Henderson gave the island to them as a wedding gift. Blanche did not care much for the island, but Dr. Leslie Weedon said it would make a good place to get away on weekends, so he accepted the island in 1898.

During high tide the island clearly was an island. At low tide the oyster bars were exposed, and by the fine letter of the law, the landmass became a peninsula. Because there were no bridges across Tampa Bay, the Weedons used a boat to get to the island from Tampa.

The name Weedon's Island took hold after an article in the *St. Petersburg Independent* referred to it as such in the early 1900s. Today the island is known as Weedon Island; the "'s" was dropped when Dr. Weedon sold it in 1923.



Photograph courtesy of John Segert.

Headstone marking the grave of Lorenzo Ross on Weedon Island Preserve.



Photograph courtesy of the St. Petersburg Museum of History.

The Weedon family on the porch of the caretaker's house on Weedon Island in 1909. From left: May Weedon Hazen, May McNeer, Isabelle Weedon McNeer, Weedon McNeer, Mrs. Carhart, Harry Lee Weedon, Mr. Carhart, Dr. Leslie W. Weedon (standing).

THE WEEDONS

Leslie Washington Weedon was the grandson of Fredrick Weedon, the physician assigned to attend to the great Seminole Chief Osceola after he surrendered to the U.S. Government in 1837. Frederick Weedon and Osceola became close friends. When Osceola died, Frederick secured his place in Florida history by removing the chief's head and preserving it in special fluids. A surgeon friend of Frederick's eventually sent the head to New York for study. The "science" of phrenology was widely practiced in those days. It was believed that by studying the skull of a person, one could determine the individual's character traits and mental abilities. The head was later destroyed in a fire, and phrenology has since been discredited.

Dr. Leslie Weedon was best known for his study of yellow fever. On several occasions he was sent by the U.S. Government to areas suffering from outbreaks of this deadly disease.

Besides his medical career, Leslie was also interested in history, archaeology and gardening. He was fascinated by the wonders and beauty of nature. Leslie also took pride in the grapefruit he grew on the island, which he shipped directly to Europe since there was no citrus commission in the state at that time.

Leslie and Blanche made Weedon Island their weekend getaway. The doctor loved the island because of its natural beauty, birds and fishing, but most of all he enjoyed exploring the Indian mounds. An amateur archaeologist, Leslie spent most of his time on the island exploring these mounds.

He built a small wooden house at the top of the largest shell mound. From the front porch, he and Blanche could look out over the tops of the trees and see the bay. The breeze and the height of the building kept the biting insects to a minimum; perhaps the mounds had served a similar purpose for the Indians.

When each weekend visit was over, the family took all their pots, pans, food, and mattresses back with them on their boat. If their belongings were left behind, it was believed they would be taken by the "less desirables" who lived in the area, such as bootleggers and homesteaders. Part of Captain

Henderson's cattle herd also lived on the island. Eventually, the Weedon family hired a caretaker to watch over the house and property.

In 1923, Leslie Weedon sold his island, with the exception of one house lot, to Eugene M. Elliott, a land developer.

Leslie Weedon died in Tampa on November 12, 1937. He had hoped his island would one day become a preserve, but this dream would not come true until 37 years later.



Photograph courtesy of the St. Petersburg Museum of History.

Dr. Weedon (center lower right) at mound, circa 1925.



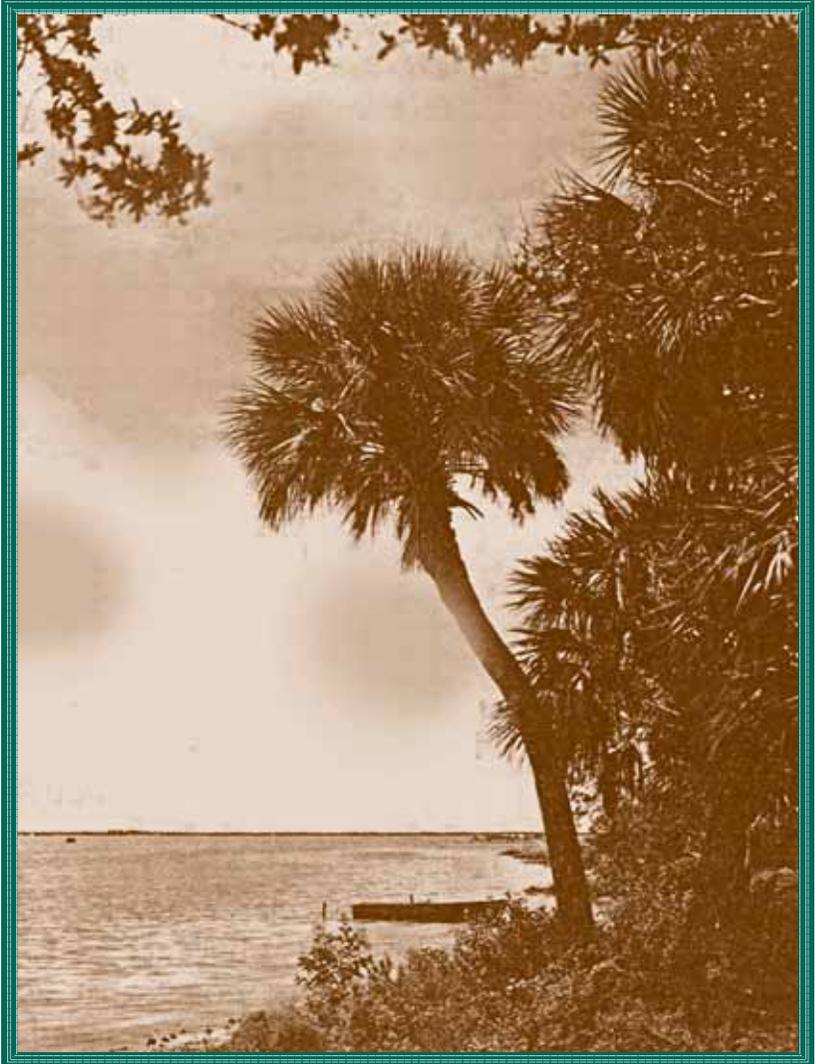
Photograph courtesy of the St. Petersburg Museum of History.

Dr. Weedon driving through his grapefruit groves on the island, circa 1925.



Photograph courtesy of Mary Weedon Keen.

Looking east from the top of the mound on Weedon Island toward Benjamin Island. Behind the trees is the catwalk that connected the two islands, circa 1925.



Photograph courtesy of Mary Weedon Keen.

Benjamin Island looking south toward Ross Island, circa 1925.

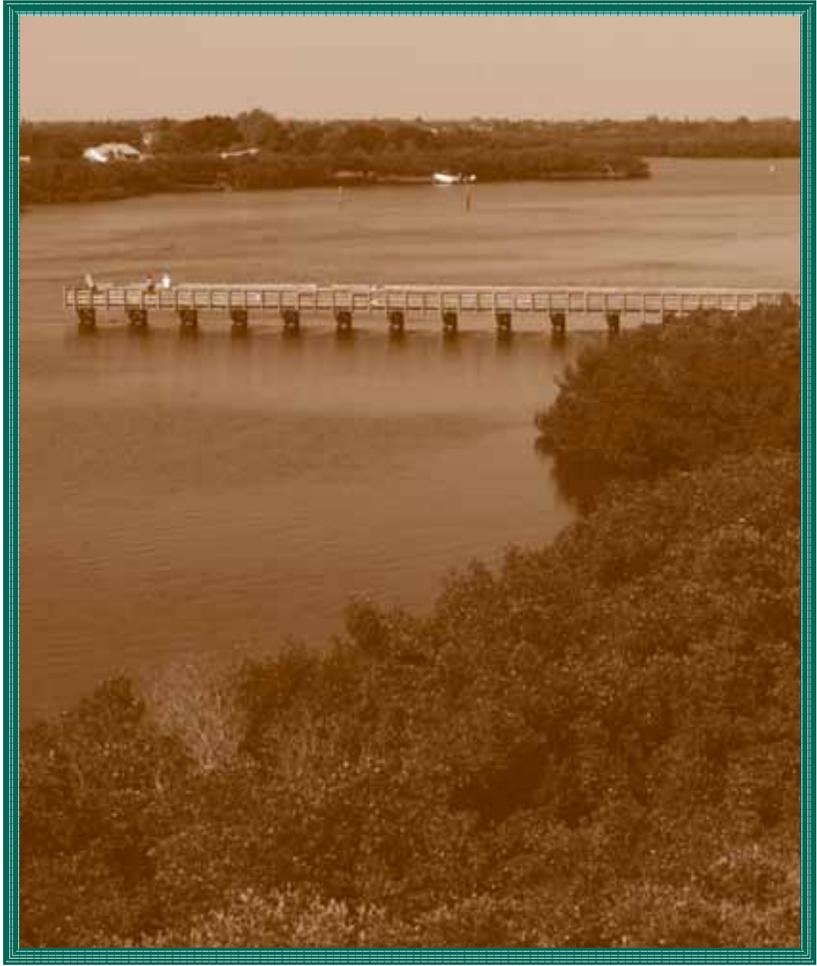
THE BENJAMINS

The closest neighbors to the Weedons were the Benjamins, who had a house on the island just to the east of Weedon Island. A narrow wooden catwalk connected the two islands. Because the water around Weedon Island was so shallow, both families used the dock on Benjamin Island.

Henry R. Benjamin purchased Benjamin Island for \$1,000 from Captain W. B. Henderson (Leslie Weedon's father-in-law) on April 30, 1878. This was a rather interesting transaction because Henderson was a Confederate cavalry captain and Benjamin had served as a Union captain. Two years later, on July 5, 1880, Henry Benjamin sold the island to his son, George M. Benjamin.

George Benjamin was a real estate broker and pharmacist in the Tampa Bay area who lived where MacDill Air Force Base is located today. Until recently, his house on the base was used as the Officers' Club. He had many landholdings throughout the area, some of which still possess his name such as Benjamin Road in Tampa and Benjamin Island at Weedon Island Preserve.

In 1910, George Benjamin sold Benjamin Island to his son, Frank Benjamin. In May of that year, the Tampa cigar factory that Frank owned burned down and he was injured in the fire. When he recovered, Frank built a simple house on the south end of his island and he and his family moved in. Frank ran an oyster-harvesting business until he sold the island in 1912. The house in which the Benjamins had lived was destroyed by a storm two years later, but the island retains the Benjamin name to this day.



Photograph courtesy of John Sargent.

Weedon Island Preserve's fishing pier now stands on the remains of the bridge that once connected Weedon Island with Shell Island.

CONSTRUCTION, SPECULATION AND ARCHAEOLOGY

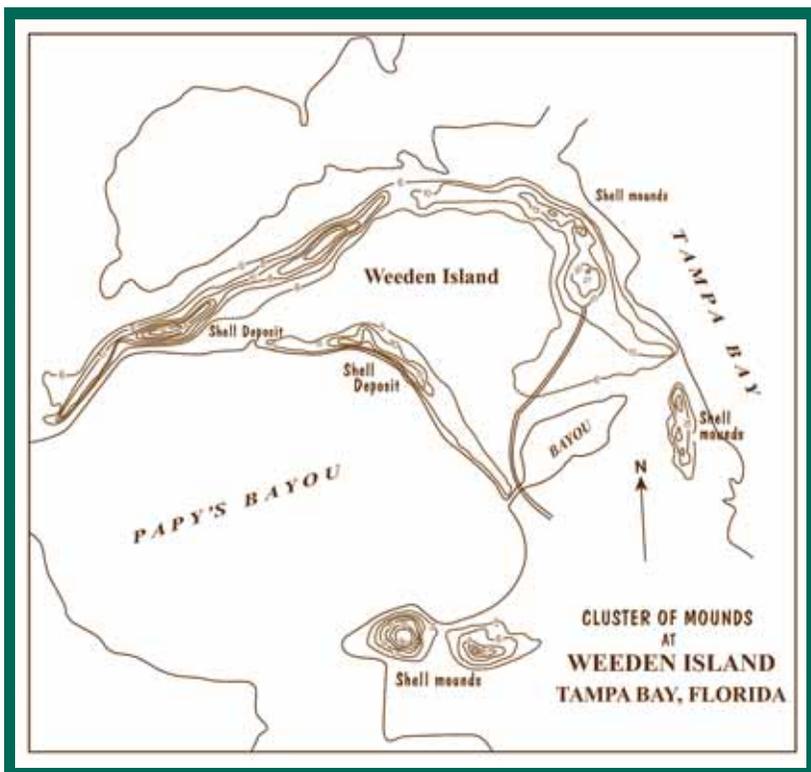
In 1922, a wooden bridge was built over Papy's Bayou connecting Weedon Island with Shell Island on the other side. Construction was undertaken by a logging company that had a sawmill where the Derby Lane dog track is now located.

The builders used native cabbage palm trees for the bridge pilings and slash pine for the planks and railings. The bridge was only one lane, just wide enough to accommodate the logging trucks. To accomplish its mission, the logging company removed about half the pines from the southern part of Weedon Island; they then moved their operation to Shell Island.

Along with the construction of the bridge came the dredging of Riviera Bay. A dragline deepened the bay and the excess fill was used to build up a road. This main road followed the same path used by early native people traveling between Weedon Island and the mainland. Indian mounds along the northern and eastern perimeter of the island were excavated and used as fill for the road.

Eugene M. Elliott, a colorful land speculator, developer and promoter, purchased Weedon Island in 1923 from Dr. Leslie Weedon in exchange for stock in Elliott's Boulevard and Bay Land Development Company. In order to sell land on Weedon Island, Elliott used the Indian mounds as a drawing card. When at first he could not lure the Smithsonian Institution to excavate the mounds, he buried an assortment of Indian artifacts in one of the mounds. He then called a reporter to take pictures, which he sent to the Smithsonian Institution.

Upon receiving the photos, Jesse Walter Fewkes, Director of the Bureau of Ethnology at the Smithsonian Institution, visited the island to determine whether the mounds were worth excavating. Fewkes immediately recognized the 'planted' artifacts, but also was impressed by the extensive mounds and decided to make a second trip to excavate (Figure 4). By 1924, over 400 skeletons were removed from the Indian mounds at Weedon Island. Today, the excavated artifacts are stored at the Smithsonian Institution.



J. Walter Fewkes, 1924.

Figure 4. This hand drawn map by J. Walter Fewkes, of the Smithsonian Institution, illustrates the location of the shell mounds.



Photograph courtesy of the St. Petersburg Museum of History.

Public watching the Smithsonian Institution excavation of an Indian mound, Weedon Island, Florida, circa 1924.



Photograph courtesy of the St. Petersburg Museum of History.

Looking west toward Weedon Island Preserve from Gandy Bridge, 1961.

When the Gandy Bridge was built across Tampa Bay, Elliott promoted the sale of bonds to finance the construction project. When sales reached \$1,000,000, Elliott worked with bridge builder, George S. “Dad” Gandy, to construct this bridge which shortened the travel distance from St. Petersburg to Tampa by 33 miles. On November 20, 1924 the bridge opened and was known at the time as the “Longest Automobile Toll Bridge in the World.” For 75 cents per vehicle and 10 cents per passenger, travelers could cross this draw bridge, which was replaced in 1956.



Illustration courtesy of Elizabeth Nally

Shoot-outs and bootlegging on Weedon Island during Prohibition.

ISLAND REAL ESTATE

Like any ambitious developer, Elliott had great plans for Weedon Island. He intended to build hotels and nightclubs and sell residential lots. He envisioned the island as the “Riviera of Florida,” which is how Riviera Bay got its name.

To entice prospective buyers, Elliott had the main road paved with shell rock from the shell mounds. This road went around Riviera Bay, across the island, and then followed the shoreline into St. Petersburg. The same dragline used to dredge Riviera Bay was used to excavate the shell mounds.

As part of the sale pitch, prospective buyers were taken to watch Jesse Walter Fewkes’ team as they excavated the Indian mounds. In addition, Elliott had remodeled Dr. Leslie Weedon’s house and turned it into the Narvaez Dance Club, which was actually a speakeasy that prospective buyers were encouraged to visit. What better way to get buyers to the island than to offer them a place to drink in the days of Prohibition? Many a person got lost in the thick woods and palmettos after a day of “buying property.”

Occasionally there were shoot-outs among local bootleggers over who was going to provide the liquor to the club. Despite Elliott’s efforts, land sales were slow, but he made money on the club until it burned down one night. The cause of the fire is not known, but one can easily imagine the impact on the “buying” public.

Undaunted, Elliott rebuilt the speakeasy. Renamed the San Remo Club, it was bigger and grander than the original. A fifty-foot tower overlooked the entire island, and the club housed a large dance floor and offered more visitor parking. The San Remo opened for business on February 12, 1926, and once again visitors to Weedon Island could enjoy dancing and refreshments. A band of Russian Gypsies provided the music.

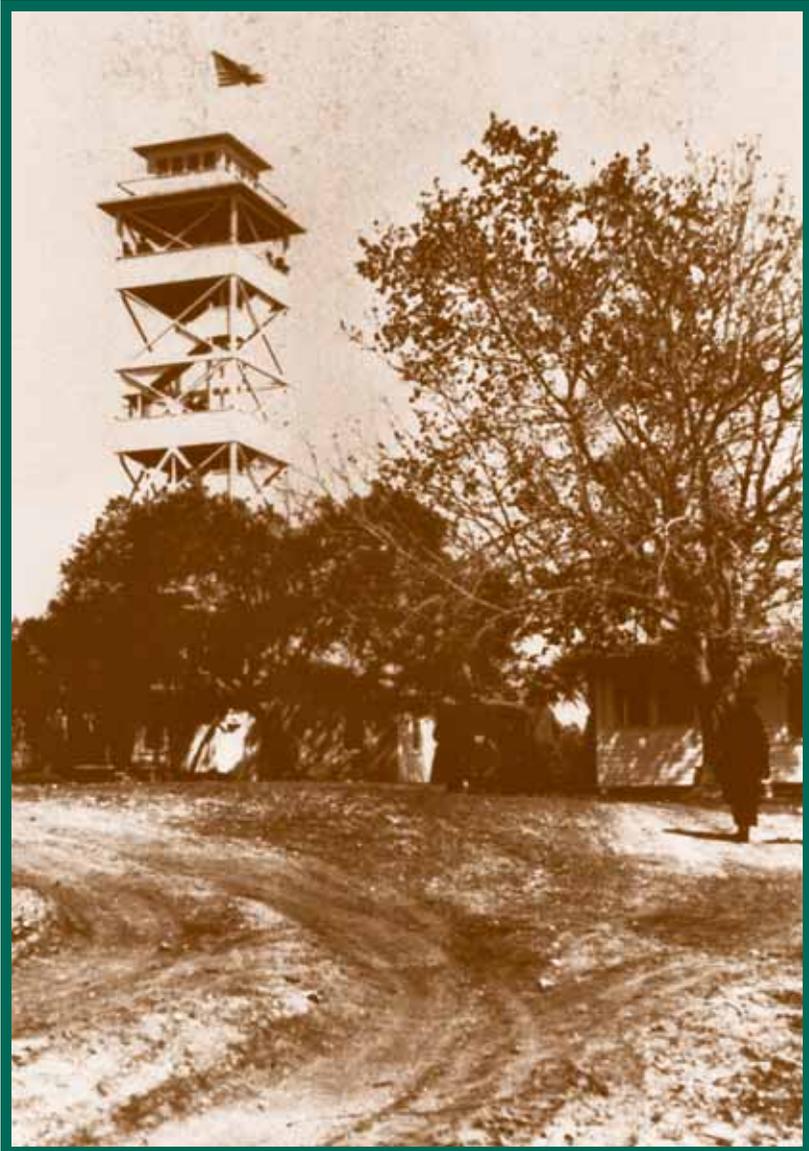
On the night of February 4, 1927, Willie Cole, a worker at the San Remo Club, returned home from work. Cole lived in a one-room shack on what is known today as “The Point” on the southeastern side of Riviera Bay. He saw a glow

to the east but did not investigate until the next morning. He found that an old tool shed built by the logging company to the east had burned down and that a friend of Elliott's from Boston, who was staying in the shed, had been killed with an axe. The building still smoked from the fire and blasting caps were scattered around the area.

The sheriff was called to investigate, and it was discovered that the victim had received \$45 in cash from Boston on the day of the murder. It was clear in the sheriff's mind that the motive was robbery and, eager to wrap up the case, he arrested the first uneducated black man he could find - Willie Cole.

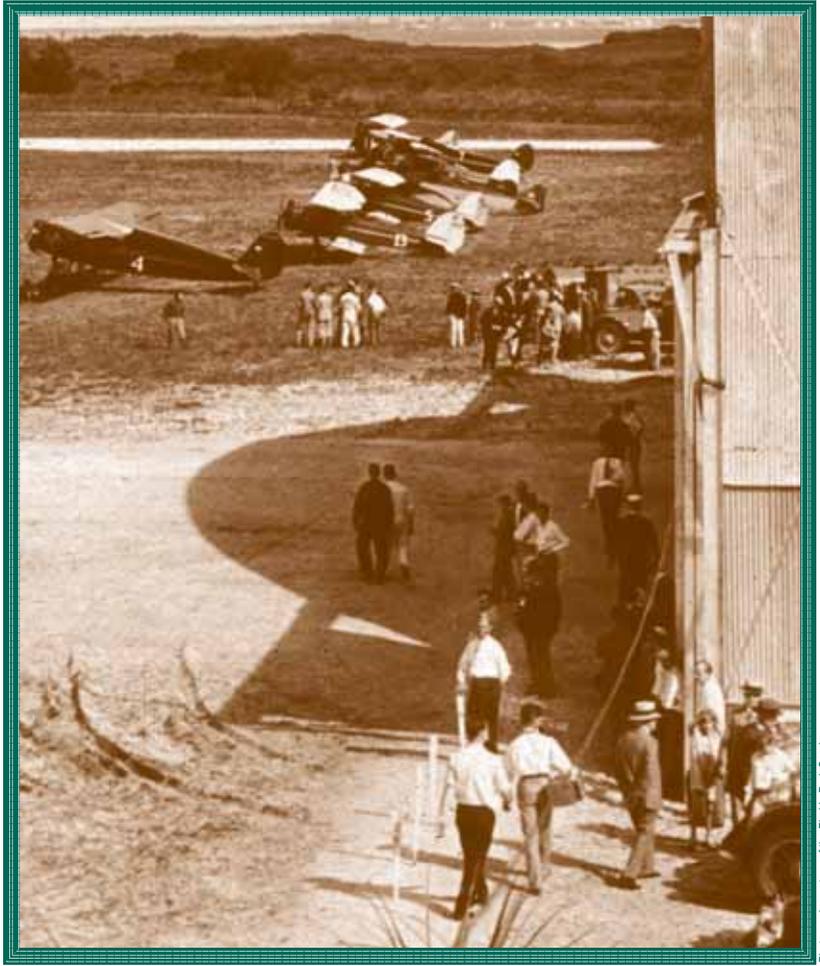
Cole was found guilty of murder and sentenced to life in prison. Believing in Cole's innocence, a local lawyer took on his case and won a retrial from the State Supreme Court. Cole pleaded guilty to a lesser offense for time served. After two-and-one-half years in jail for a crime he did not commit, Cole went free.

When the bottom fell out of the housing market in 1926, the bank foreclosed on Elliott's property, thereby ending his dream. The island first came up for sale to the government on April 11, 1928. The First National Bank offered to sell it to the City of St. Petersburg for use as a park, but the City turned down the offer. In 1929, the stock market collapsed and so did Tampa's First National Bank, which held the title to Weedon Island. Dr. Leslie Weedon paid the taxes on his small lot on the island until his death in 1937.



Photograph courtesy of the St. Petersburg Museum of History.

San Remo Club with its 50-foot tower, 1926.



Photograph courtesy of the Florida Park Service.

Grand Central Airport (later known as Sky Harbor), Weedon Island, 1936.

AIRPLANES AND MOVIES

On October 5, 1929, Fred Blair, along with other investors, began building an airport on Weedon Island. Within a year, the airport, hangar and control tower were in operation. When Eastern Air Transport moved its national headquarters to the island on January 27, 1931, Grand Central Airport became a busy place. Eastern Air Transport (which eventually became Eastern Airline) provided the first commercial air service from Tampa to St. Petersburg.

T. C. Parker arrived in St. Petersburg on April 27, 1933 with dreams of building a movie studio on Weedon Island. Parker, a World War I veteran with a background in the movie industry, convinced Fred Blair to back the venture, and the two of them formed the Sun Haven Movie Studio. Their plan was to use the old San Remo Club for the studio.

Soon it became clear, however, that without big-name Hollywood types, the studio would not make it. So Parker convinced Aubrey Kennedy, a movie producer from Hollywood, to join the project. Kennedy brought with him Hollywood stars James Kirkwood, Marshall Neilan, Ford Sterling, and George Malford. The plan was to make 24 movies, but first a larger sound stage had to be built. This stage was named the Kennedy Studio Center.

The Sun Haven venture caught the attention of Buster Keaton, who came to Florida to see this new studio. Keaton thought if this operation were successful, he might bring his production company to the St. Petersburg area.

The first movie made at Weedon Island was *Chloe, Love is Calling You*. Filming started on May 22, 1933. Olive Borden played a little girl found by a voodoo-wielding maid (Georgette Harvey), who raised the girl as her own into adulthood. When it was discovered that the girl was the daughter of a well-to-do family who thought she had drowned, the maid cast spells to prevent the family from retrieving the girl from the swamps in which she and the maid lived. An interesting sidelight is that during the filming, Olive had to do a scene in which her character is supposed to be drowning. No one knew that the actress could not swim. When the director said "cut" and the cameras stopped rolling, Olive continued to struggle in the water until the directors, Marshall Neilan and Reed Howes, jumped in and saved her. So the movie's drowning scene was no act!

The second film was the biggest of the movies made at Weedon Island. *Playthings of Desire* opened at the Capital Theater in St. Petersburg on September 2, 1933. This movie was about a rich, spoiled young man, played by James Kirkwood. Molly O'Day played one of his girlfriends. Many local people were involved in making this movie. The gala opening brought people from all over and it looked as though the movie industry was here to stay. But this optimism was short-lived.

The third and last movie filmed at Weedon Island was *Hired Wives*. This movie was about a love-them-and-leave-them man starring Greta Nissen and her real-life husband Weldon Heyburn. The movie was ready for release when the federal government moved in and closed down the studio for back taxes. Everything was confiscated - all three movies, the equipment and the sound stage.

The original Sun Haven Studio survived but essentially was out of business. The facility was leased to Walter C. Martin for two years. Martin hoped to film more movies, but his ideas never got off the ground.

There was a breath of life in the old Sun Haven Studio in January 1955 when John Hugh, a president of Empire Studios of Orlando, leased the facility to make the movie, *The Osceola Story*. But Hugh had a difficult time getting backers for the film, so the plan failed and the studio fell silent.



Photograph courtesy of the St. Petersburg Museum of History.

This photograph is a scene from the movie *Chloe, Love is Calling You*.



Photograph courtesy of the St. Petersburg Times, March 13, 1986.

Sky Harbor (formerly Grand Central) Airport control tower, circa 1947.

Meanwhile, the Grand Central Airport had become a thriving operation. Eastern Air Transport was flying passengers to Tampa or Daytona Beach aboard a Curtiss RC I "Kingbird," a U.S. military transport plane. Locals could even get to New York City in a mere 24 hours via Eastern Air Transport's Curtiss "Condor", the last biplane airliner ever produced.

Airmail left daily, including Sundays, from the airport. Crowds of spectators came out to see air shows. These shows featured many of the great fliers of the day such as Eddie Rickenbacker, Al Williams, Clem Sohn, and Betty Playford, one of the first women in aviation.

There was competition between Grand Central Airport on Weedon Island and Albert Whitted Field in St. Petersburg. Blair wanted the seaplane pilots to use his airport and Riviera Bay for landing and docking. But the pilots felt they needed more water and room than was available around Weedon Island so they continued to use the airport in St. Petersburg.

Blair and Grand Central Airport suffered tax problems with the City of St. Petersburg in February 1936. The dispute dragged on for several years. The City wanted Blair to lease the airport to J. Otis Beard, who, backed by a government contract, was looking for an airport where he could teach flying.

For his part, Blair wanted the City to rebuild the bridge connecting Shell Island to Weedon Island that had burned down in 1939. Without the bridge, people from St. Petersburg had to drive around Riviera Bay to get to Grand Central Airport, adding 45 minutes to the trip. Blair claimed that this extra time was responsible for reduced traffic at Grand Central.

Blair refused to lease the airport to Beard – he would only sell it to him – but said he would lease the airport to the City for one dollar per year for five years if the City would write off his tax debt. When the City refused this offer, Blair and Beard tried to strike a deal. Beard said he was willing to pay the back taxes until he found out that Blair had lied to him about the amount that was owed: the bill was \$4,000 - not \$400.

The bridge was not rebuilt until 1943. In the meantime, the City foreclosed on Blair's property; and that was the end of the Grand Central Airport. In August 1941, Clarence Ludwig of St. Petersburg bought the airport for back taxes of \$4,000. He renamed the facility Sky Harbor Airport.

When World War II broke out, the U.S. Government leased the airport from Ludwig and Sky Harbor became a training site for Army and Navy pilots. The short runways provided pilots excellent practice conditions for carrier landings and quick takeoffs. When the war was over, Ludwig trained GIs to fly on the GI bill.

Ludwig also sold Piper Cubs (a small aircraft built at Vero Beach and Lake Worth) and continued the air shows at Sky Harbor. About this time, however, the St. Petersburg-Clearwater Airport began taking a lot of business away from Sky Harbor. The island airport could not compete with the other airfields in the area. The last straw was when the bridge burned down for the second time on April 17, 1953. Although the bridge was restored within a few years, Sky Harbor was out of business.

All that remains today of the island's once great airport is the overgrown runway, a small part of the control tower (the dilapidated hangar was taken down in 1989), and the remains of a plane that crashed into Papy's Bayou on May 14, 1935. After lifting off the runway, the plane lost power and dived nose-first into the bay. The two people on board were killed on impact. The *St. Petersburg Times* covered the spectacular rescue attempt and gave a graphic account of the condition of the bodies.



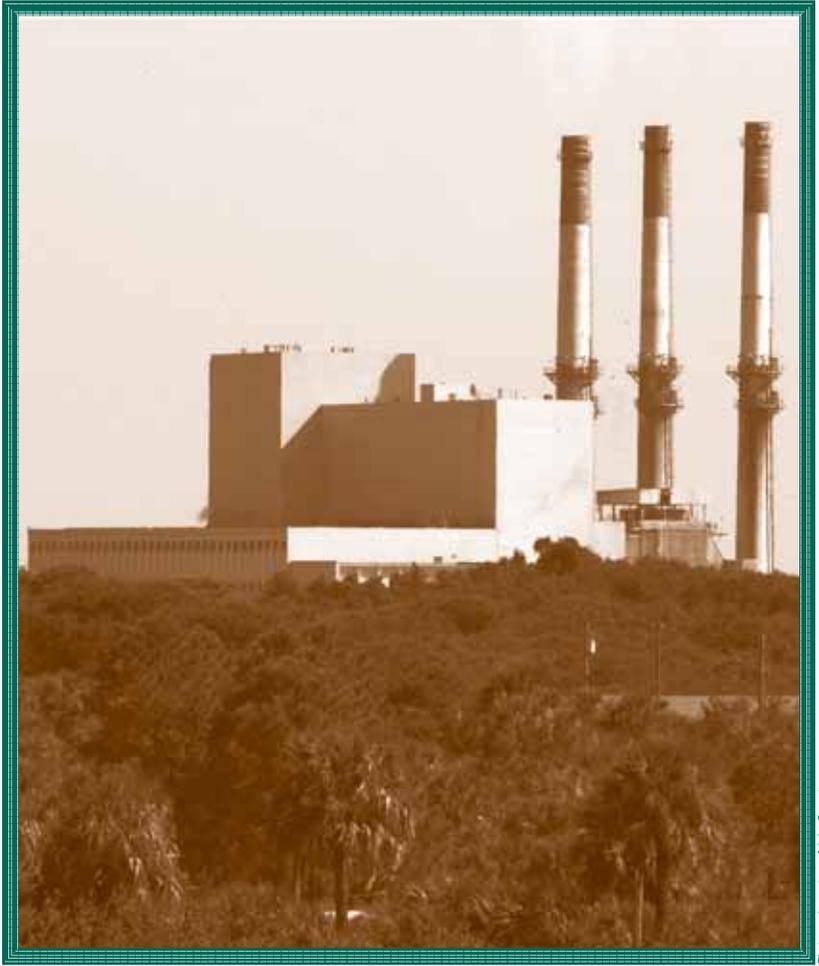
Photograph courtesy of the Florida Park Service.

Passengers boarding Eastern Air Transport's Curtiss Condor bound for New York City, circa 1931.



Photograph courtesy of the Florida Park Service.

Grand Central Airport hangar, circa 1931.



Photograph courtesy of John Sargent.

Looking north across Weedon Island Preserve at the Bartow Power Plant built in the 1950s.

POWER COMES TO WEEDON ISLAND

In the mid-1930s, the City of St. Petersburg and Pinellas County formed a committee to look into the possibility of turning the northern half of the island into a national park. The committee went to Washington, D.C. to talk to Arno B. Cammerer, the head of the National Park Service.

The committee hoped the National Park Service would buy the land and build a monument recognizing Weedon Island as Hernando de Soto's landing place. Cammerer, however, wanted the city or county to pay for the land, after which the National Park Service would build the monument and manage the island. The County backed out of the deal and the City could not afford to finance the project alone. There was one last hope: obtaining a Presidential Executive Act to designate Weedon Island as a historic site. This was possible but would take some time.

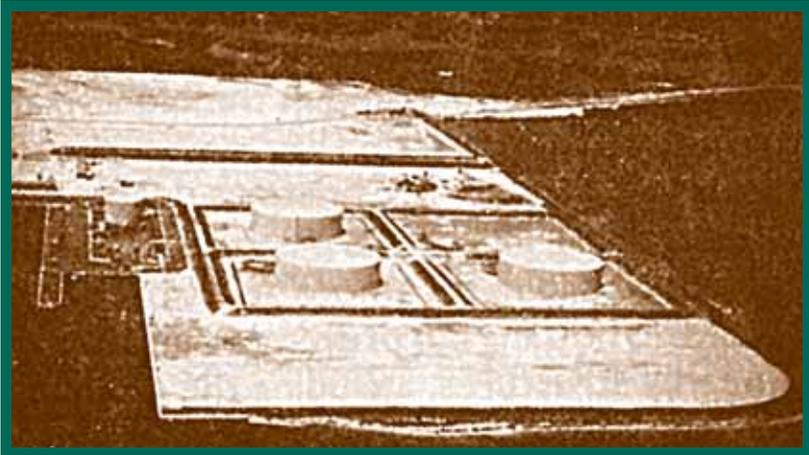
In March 1937, John R. Swanton, an ethnologist and chairman of the Smithsonian Institution's de Soto Commission, came to the Tampa Bay area to research the locations of de Soto's landing place. The exact location was not determined, but the commission concluded that it was somewhere around the Little Manatee River. The end result was that the island did not get the monument, and Weedon Island did not become a protected preserve. To this day, Hernando de Soto's landing site remains a matter of research and debate.

In 1955, the Florida Power Corporation (now known as Progress Energy) bought the northern portion of the island from Mr. L. W. Baynard of St. Petersburg with the intention of building a power plant. A group headed by Baynard had also purchased more than six hundred acres of the island from First National Bank to develop a floral garden, but rising labor costs after World War II caused Baynard to abandon this idea.

Local conservationists opposed the power plant, but the corporation won out. The population of Tampa Bay was growing rapidly and electric power was in demand. A major dredge-and-fill project preceded construction of the plant. The bulk of the fill was removed from the bay and used to extend the island into the bay another 2,500 feet. It was on this fill that the Bartow Power Plant was built. As a result of the dredging, two small islands were covered up and Mud Hole Island became part of Weedon Island.

The island's three primary Indian mounds are on Progress Energy property. The main burial mound sits in a hammock north of the entrance road to the power plant. Leslie Weedon's house was located on the largest of the shell mounds. Today, a roadway leading to the power plant divides that mound. The old movie studio was about one hundred yards northeast of this mound. The third mound runs from southeast to north on the bay side of the island.

In 1960, a temporary saltwater conversion plant was built on the north side of the power plant's intake docks. The project was a joint effort by Florida Power Corporation, Cornell University and the federal government. In this plant, water from the bay was frozen and the concentrated salt water was washed off after the ice was crushed. This is possible because salt water freezes at a lower temperature than fresh water. Fresh water could then be obtained by melting the crushed ice. The plant produced 35,000 to 50,000 gallons of fresh water daily and remained in operation for three years.



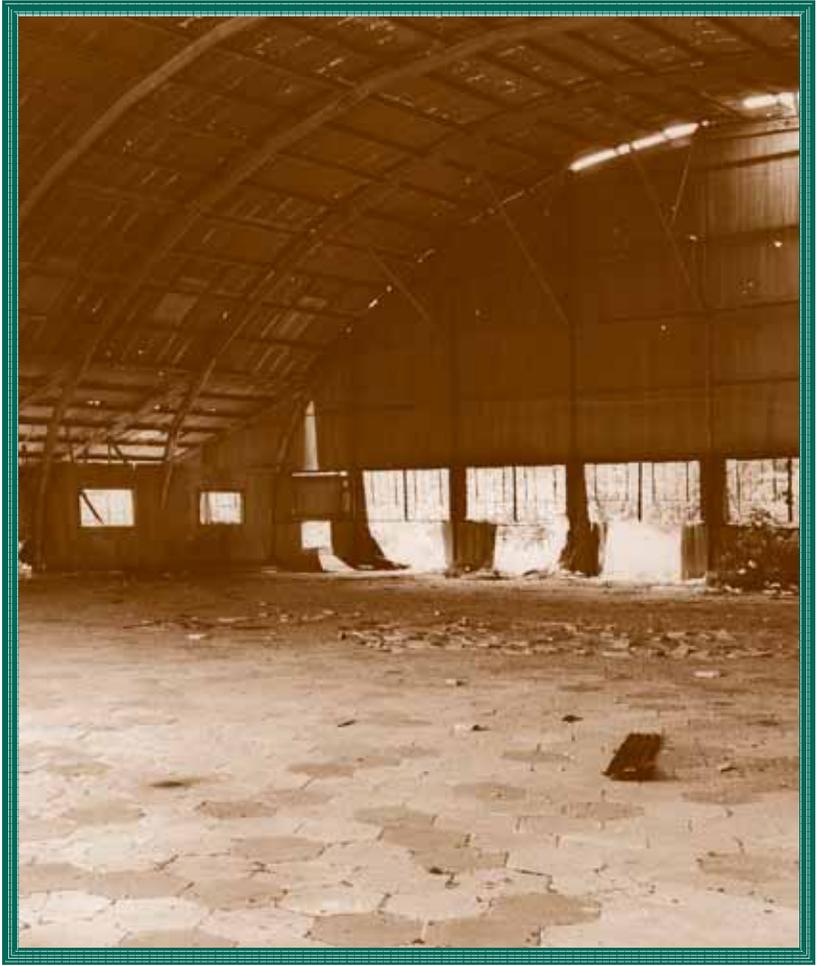
Photograph courtesy of Progress Energy (formerly Florida Power Corporation).

Florida Power Corporation's Bartow Plant, 1958.



Photograph by ELD Staff.

Entrance to Progress Energy's Bartow power plant.



Photograph courtesy of the Florida Park Service.

The dilapidated, graffiti-ridden hangar built by the Grand Central Airport.

VANDALS AND ACCIDENTS

In January 1962, William Sears, then curator and archaeologist from the Florida State Museum (now the Florida Museum of Natural History) in Gainesville, came to study the Indian mounds on Weedon Island. His goal was to date the mounds more precisely. Armed guards were hired for security during the dig after vandals stole three skeletons from the mounds.

In 1964, someone stole the headstones from the graves of Lorenzo and Percy Ross. The Daughters of the Confederacy would lay flowers on the graves once a year, but not many other people knew of or came by to visit the graves.

The Florida Power Corporation used the old movie studio as a warehouse until the night of June 25, 1963 when the structure burned to the ground. The studio was not the last structure to perish from a fire on Weedon Island.

In 1964 or 1965, the Poster Art and Display Company began making parade floats on the island in the old airplane hangar. The company also leased the old control tower and used it as a warehouse. On the night of February 16, 1967, the control tower burned down, destroying Christmas decorations that had been stored there by the St. Petersburg Merchants Association. Because of the building's remote location on the island, firemen could do nothing but prevent the fire from spreading to the other nearby structures; the old hangar was spared.

In August 1965, a fifteen-year-old boy died in a car crash on the old wooden bridge. In response to this accident people started talking about the use and safety of the structure. Nearly five years later, on January 8, 1970, the bridge took its second victim, a teenage girl who was killed in a car when it went over the side of the bridge and sank.

The public began pressuring the local government to do something about the bridge. Meetings were held to consider rebuilding the structure or tearing it down. Some people valued the bridge as a historic structure. It was, after all, the only wooden bridge left in the county. Fishermen still used the bridge, and it stood as a tangible reminder of earlier times. It was finally decided to lower the speed limit and to paint the old structure. On February 16, 1970, someone tried to burn down the bridge, but the fire went out before much damage was done.



Photograph courtesy of the St. Petersburg Times, March 13, 1986.

The old wooden bridge at Weedon Island Preserve.

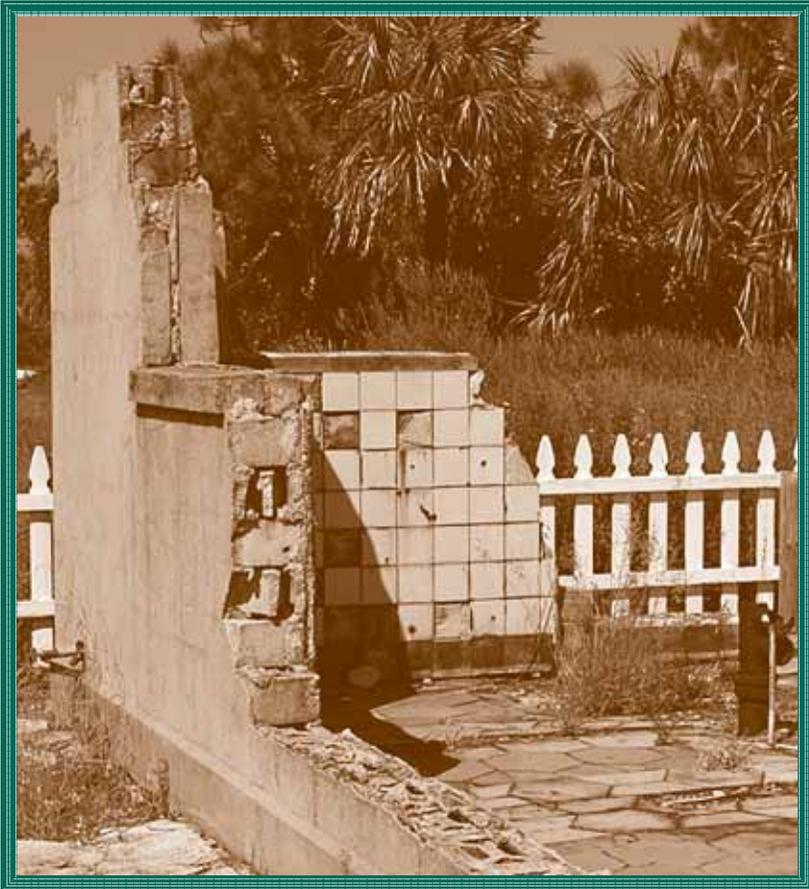
After many meetings and hearings, the decision was finally made to cut one hundred feet from the middle of the bridge. This would allow fishermen to continue fishing from the structure yet prevent cars from crossing it. On October 1, 1970, the city of St. Petersburg sent a work crew to remove the midsection of the bridge, and so ended its forty-eight-year-old history as a link to St. Petersburg.

The closest Weedon Island ever came to a major environmental disaster was in February 1970 when a Greek oil tanker, *Delian Apollon*, ran aground while trying to dock at the power plant. The ship lost thousands of gallons of oil that coated the seagrass beds and mangroves of the island. It took weeks to clean up the spill, and to this day, it is still possible to bore down into the grass beds and find a line of oil.



Photograph courtesy of John Sargent.

The popular wooden fishing bridge was replaced in 1994 to meet modern safety requirements. The new fishing pier was constructed in the same location as its predecessor.



Photograph courtesy of John Sargent.

Remnants of the airport control tower on Weedon Island Preserve.

On April 25, 2000, the medical helicopter *Bayflite 3* was returning to St. Joseph's Hospital in Tampa after dropping a trauma patient at Bayfront Medical Center in St. Petersburg. At approximately 12:15 p.m. on a clear day, the helicopter hit a radio tower guy wire and crashed into the mangroves of Weedon Island Preserve. All those aboard, the pilot, nurse and paramedic, were killed. Why the helicopter drifted off its routine flight path remains a mystery. All aboard were skilled professionals dedicated to their work.



Photograph by ELD Staff.

National Register of Historic Places marker on Weedon Island Preserve.

THE PEOPLE SPEAK

As St. Petersburg grew, people began using the island as a dump. Day after day more trash and junk, including old cars and refrigerators, piled up. The island of beauty and history was fast becoming an island of trash. Many local citizens hoped something positive could be done with the dying, trash-ridden island.

A number of people were involved in the final push to fulfill Dr. Leslie Weedon's dream of preserving the island as a protected area. In 1970, Ray Robinson, president of the now defunct Suncoast Archaeological Society, contacted the president of Florida Power Corporation and requested the company donate land containing some of the Indian mounds for a historic monument. Florida Power Corporation offered to lease a five-acre tract at the plant entrance on Weedon Drive for a small museum.

Robinson then contacted the National Park Service and requested that the tract be considered a national historic monument, citing the previous efforts and consideration by the Park Service in 1937. A representative from the National Park Service met with Robinson and was taken on a tour of Weedon Island and the five-acre tract.

Although much impressed with the island, the representative stated that the National Park Service could not designate the tract as a national historic monument because the site did not contain any Indian remains and, if it did, the land would have to be donated outright to the government and not leased. He recommended that the County or State purchase the lower half of Weedon Island for a historic park.

Two owners held title to the bulk of Weedon Island property not controlled by Florida Power Corporation: Robert Wray and Ed Wright. Robert Wray, a land investor and developer, also owned Ross Island and part of nearby Googe Island. Upon Ed Wright's death, his share of the island was held in trust by Ruth Kirby. Kirby was interested in selling the land in order to settle the estate.

Wray had always wanted to build on his islands. In 1963, he talked the County into putting dredged sand from a sewer pipe installation project in

Papy's Bayou on his islands. However, this did not solve his construction problems. So he offered to trade his islands for higher land on the west side of Riviera Bay where he knew he could build. When this trade did not work, he offered the islands for sale for \$1.5 million. Ruth Kirby asked \$5.5 million for Wright's property.

In the early 1970s, Ray Robinson contacted Ruth Kirby, Dick Bothwell of the *St. Petersburg Times*, and state representatives, Roger Wilson and Jim Robinson. Both Ruth Kirby and Robert Wray were amenable to selling their portions of Weedon Island to the State. Dick Bothwell wrote a lengthy article in the *St. Petersburg Times*, detailing the prospect of saving the island.

Ruth Kirby, Robert Wilson, Jim Robinson, and State Representative Dennis McDonald flew to Tallahassee for a meeting with the State Cabinet. They succeeded in persuading the Cabinet to purchase Weedon Island under the Endangered Lands Acquisition Act. The slow-moving bureaucracy then set in, and the purchase was delayed several times.

Irritated by these delays, Ruth Kirby finally took out a half-page advertisement in the *St. Petersburg Times* offering Weedon Island to any interested buyer. Representative Jim Robinson took this advertisement to Tallahassee and placed it on the table at a State Cabinet meeting, pointing out that Weedon Island would be lost to the State if the Cabinet did not act immediately. His tactic worked. The Cabinet members voted to approve the purchase of Weedon Island. The transaction was finally completed in 1974.

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(695 acres, more or less, as measured to Gov. meander line, with approximately 10 miles frontage on Tampa Bay, Riviera Bay, Pappys Bayou and Bayou Grande, located in St. Petersburg, Pinellas County, Fla.)

WEEDON'S ISLAND

One of the last few remaining large waterfront tracts in fast-growing Tampa Bay area. An island group in northeast St. Petersburg, rich in natural scenic beauty, object of Smithsonian Institution expedition in 1924 and recently added to National Register of Historic Places identifying properties on basis of historic and archaeological value, reflecting Weedon's Island's early Indian culture dating back to 300 A.D.

Picturesque oak and pine hammocks cover a large portion of this property and are very unusual in comparison to remaining undeveloped waterfront land on Tampa Bay. Land elevations range from submerged to 17 feet above sea level and contain only true natural oak hammocks remaining in this area . . . consisting of live oaks, cedars, yellow pines and sable palms . . . thousands of small live oak trees which could be used in landscaping.

A land & Bay study by Land Design & Research (planners of Columbia, Md.) refers to Weedon's Island as one of the most desirable tracts in St. Petersburg.

A similar tract of some 280 acres being developed in immediate vicinity of Weedon's Island (planned by Land Design & Research for a top-flight planned residential development) has been valued in its completed state at \$45,000,000. Additional planned development to the northwest, near approaches to Frankland Bridge, has been valued in recent news items at \$150,000,000 when completed.

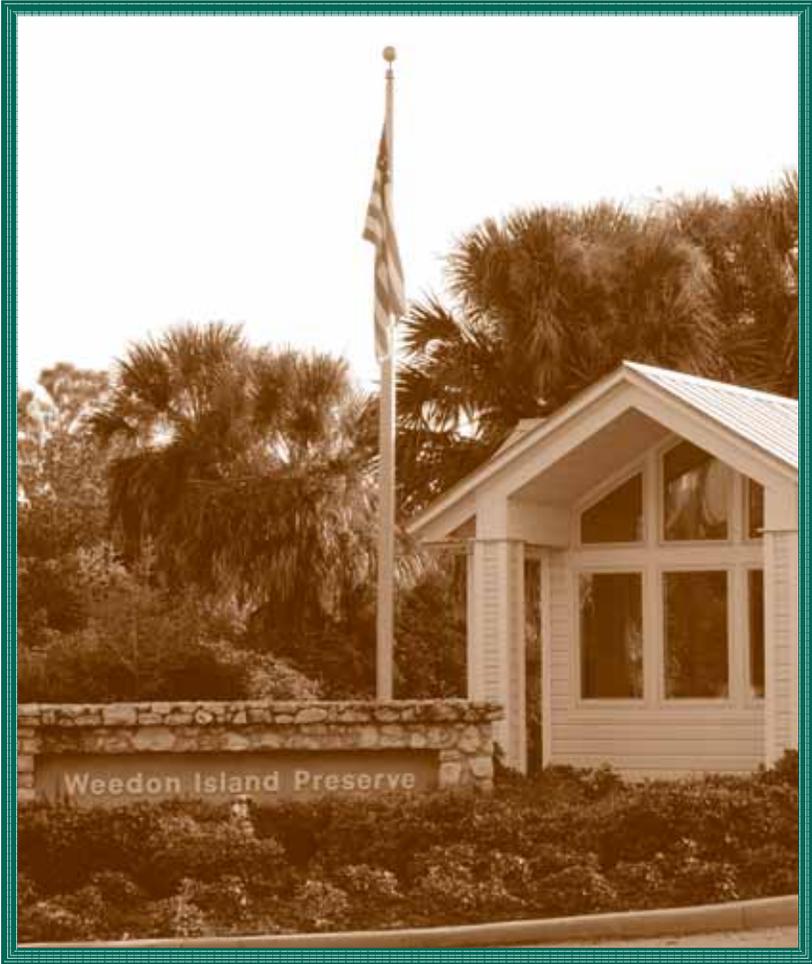
PLEASE PHONE OR WRITE US FOR PRICING AND DETAILED INFORMATION.

ESTATE OF ED C. WRIGHT

Ruth B. Kirby, Executrix

Photocopy courtesy of the St. Petersburg Times, 1971.

Ruth Kirby put her part of Weedon Island up for sale – asking price was \$5.5 million.



Photograph courtesy of John Sagert.

Entrance station to Weedon Island Preserve.

A PRESERVE IS BORN

By the early 1970s, protection of Weedon Island as a preserve was becoming a reality. In July 1972 Weedon Island was put on the National Register of Historic Places. In February 1974, the State of Florida purchased the land with \$6 million from the state's Endangered Lands Program, and a preserve was born. At long last Dr. Leslie Weedon's dream was coming true. Over half of the island was now officially the Weedon Island State Preserve. The Florida Power Corporation owned a majority of the rest of the island.

The first Florida Park rangers were stationed at the Preserve in 1979. With the Preserve now controlled by the Florida Park Service, the first job at hand was to clean up the area. Park Service workers were sent in with tractors, dump trucks and tow trucks. Local citizens helped with the cleanup efforts. The trash they collected lined the road as far as one could see. Signs were posted, warning that littering was illegal. On December 28, 1980, Weedon Island State Preserve officially opened to the public.

The future looked bright for the Preserve until March 24, 1981 when the State announced that negotiations were underway with the Florida Power Corporation regarding the purchase of a portion of their land on Weedon Island to build a prison. Local citizens were outraged by this announcement, and Florida Power Corporation soon abandoned the venture.

Another major public outcry occurred in February 1988 when Ney Landrum, then Division Director of the Florida Park Service, announced plans for reclassifying Weedon Island as a recreational area. This would allow the Park Service to develop the island with roads, parking lots, picnic areas and play grounds for visitors to the area. Conservationists and concerned citizens staunchly opposed to this plan successfully blocked the development of the Preserve into a recreational park.

In 1988 the Weedon Island Advisory Committee was formed at the initiative of private citizens with the support of some local government officials. This committee sent a report to the Florida Park Service recommending the proper use of the Preserve. The consensus was that the majority of the Preserve should remain undeveloped with the focus placed on resource management, protection and public education. Minor improvements were planned to help achieve these objectives.

The Florida Park Service was finally charged with managing and restoring Weedon Island State Preserve as a natural area. Specifically, the land was to be managed as a representative example of natural biological communities in Florida. Very active and aggressive management procedures were required in order to eliminate or reduce the past influences of humans in the area.

The most formidable opponent to restoring the island was the removal of the exotic vegetative species (plants not indigenous to the area). Australian pines and Brazilian pepper trees were a serious threat to the native plants and animals of the Preserve's natural biological communities. The exotics had taken a strong hold, especially in areas once cleared for the old airport runways.

In August 1989, some eighty local volunteers joined forces with the Florida Park Service to begin removing the exotics from the Preserve. It took years for the exotics to reach their densely populated state, and it would take years to restore an area's vegetation to its natural condition.

In May 1990, the Florida Park Service and the St. Petersburg Fire Department carried out the first ecological burn on 57 acres of the Preserve. An ecological, or prescribed burn, is a controlled fire conducted to mimic naturally occurring fires. Fires ignited by lightning strikes were once common in the Florida landscape. After years of suppression, the ecological benefits of fire became apparent and prescribed burns were incorporated into land management strategies (Table1).

Table 1. Ecological benefits of prescribed burns.

- Control shrub and hardwood trees
- Reduce saw palmetto dominance
- Reduce and control exotic trees and plants
- Increase native grasses and wildflowers
- Maintain the vigor of pineland communities
- Improve seedbeds for pines
- Increase fruiting of many plants used by wildlife
- Introduce natural fertilizer (ash) during the primary growing season
- Promote rapid coverage of the area by herbs and grasses, providing food and cover for wildlife
- Reduce chance of wildfires

Following the 1990 prescribed fire, herbicides were applied to treat the exotic plants that remained. Maintaining control over exotic vegetation remains an on-going project.

The next major challenge was the protection of the seagrass beds, which provide an important food source for manatees, marine turtles and many fish. The seagrasses also serve as a shelter or nursery grounds for many invertebrates and fish such as pink shrimp, clams, scallops, blue crabs, pompano, and mullet. To protect these areas, the Florida Park Service actively enforced a state law prohibiting commercial fishing in the Preserve.

In late 1990, Bankers Insurance Group bought a 47-acre parcel on the north side of Riviera Bay from Langston Holland with plans to build a 300,000 square-foot office building on the site. But once again the public mounted a strong opposition and Pinellas County Government purchased the tract using funds from its Endangered Lands Program to prevent further development in the area.

Citizen support for the Preserve continued and, in 1991, the former Weedon Island Advisory Committee established a charter and became the Friends of Weedon Island, Inc. This citizen-based, not-for-profit organization continued to support the protection of Weedon Island Preserve and began promoting plans for a cultural and natural history center on the site.



Photograph courtesy of the Florida Park Service.

Barbara Sheen Todd, charter member of the Friends of Weedon Island, Inc. and former Pinellas County Commissioner, helps with clean-up efforts.

After the Langston Holland tract was purchased, the County, the Florida Park Service and the Florida Power Corporation negotiated an agreement to manage and protect the Preserve jointly. The County was to build an entrance station to the Preserve, which Florida Power would staff at night. The Florida Park Service was responsible for the land management. This agreement was effective in September 1992.

About the same time, the State of Florida experienced budget deficits. These financial shortages extended to the



Photograph courtesy of John Sagert.

Weedon Island Preserve Cultural and Natural History Center.

Florida Park Service and Weedon Island State Preserve was placed on a list of proposed park closures. With the support of citizens, advocates, and the City of St. Petersburg, the Pinellas County Board of County Commissioners, then chaired by Barbara Sheen Todd, intervened and asked the State of Florida to transfer the Preserve into the County Park Department. The State and the County entered into a lease agreement in 1993 that brought the Preserve management under the control of the Pinellas County Park Department. A slight name change also occurred and the area became known as the Weedon Island *Preserve*, although the land still belonged to the State.

Within months of the agreement with the State, Pinellas County began negotiating an agreement with the City of St. Petersburg and the Southwest Florida Water Management District to finance improvements for public access and restoration of the Preserve, resulting in the appropriation of \$3.2 million.

The commitment to manage Weedon Island Preserve as a natural system did not change. Consequently, in 1998, management was transferred from the County's Park Department to the Department of Environmental Management's Environmental Lands Division (ELD). Numerous volunteer and civic groups stepped forward to assist the ELD staff with the management of the Preserve. Local Boy Scout Troops volunteered over 3,000 hours to blaze

trails, build benches, and remove debris. The Friends of Weedon Island, Inc., under the leadership of then-president Connie Kone, continued to support plans for an education center.

Today Weedon Island Preserve is a well-known birding and fishing site. Although shellfishing is prohibited in all of Tampa Bay for health reasons, Weedon Island Preserve's fishing pier and outlying oyster bars are ideal sites for catching sea trout, snook and sheepshead. Two self-guided canoe trails allow exploration of the Preserve's islands. Over 4.7 miles of boardwalks and trails offer visitors an opportunity to enjoy and experience natural Florida.

In December 2002, the Weedon Island Preserve Cultural and Natural History Center opened with the mission of interpreting the natural, cultural and archaeological history of the Preserve in order to demonstrate how the environment and people supported and shaped each other. To accomplish this mission, the Center offers interpretive tours and hikes, teaching programs and curriculum development, exhibits and workshops, and other events. Designed with the help of Native Americans, and keeping with their tradition, the orientation of the Center in the landscape is along the four cardinal points of the compass, with the entrance facing east.

Weedon Island Preserve remains one of Florida's most important natural and cultural resources, and its proper management remains the priority of Pinellas County as caretaker of the Preserve. The County is committed to restoring the natural communities on the islands while teaching the public about the interrelationships between people and the environment. Weedon Island Preserve remains "A Place to Remember."

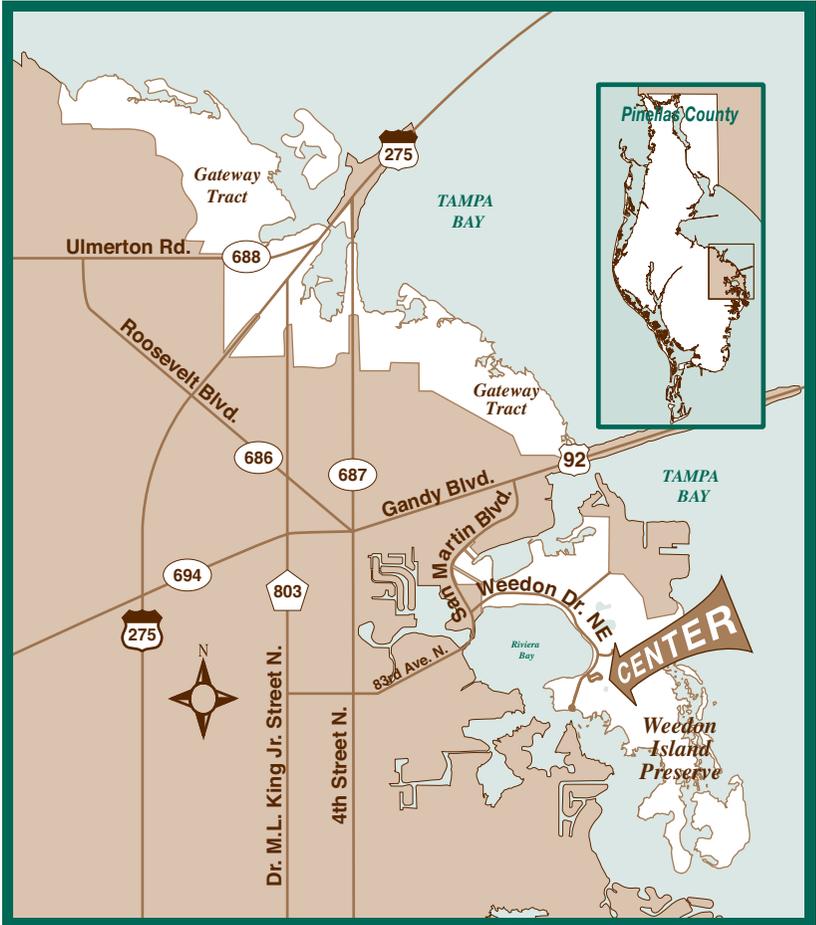
The dream of Dr. Leslie Washington Weedon has been, at last, realized.



Photograph by ELD Staff.

Weedon Island Preserve in its natural state.

DRIVING DIRECTIONS



Map illustration by ELD Staff.

Driving directions to the Center: Navigate to Gandy Boulevard (US92/SR600) and turn south onto San Martin Boulevard. Drive approximately one mile and turn east on Weedon Drive NE, which will take you directly to the entrance of Weedon Island Preserve. The Center is the third left after you pass through the Preserve entrance gate.

Weedon Island Preserve Cultural and
Natural History Center
1800 Weedon Drive NE
St. Petersburg, FL 33702
Call (727) 453-6500 for Center hours.



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GLOSSARY

- Archaic Period *n.* a name given to the hunter-gatherer society that lived on the North American continent from approximately 8,000 to 2,000 years BCE.
- Before Common Era *n.* academic dating uses BCE in place of BC (Before Christ) to denote dating of eras.
- Benthic *n.* the collection of organisms living on or in the sea or lake bottoms.
- Common Era *n.* academic dating uses CE in place of AD (Anno Domini) to denote dating of eras.
- Cultural Anthropology *n.* the branch of anthropology that deals with the origin, distribution, and characterization of human racial groups.
- Debitage *n.* waste flakes of lithic (stone) from the reduction process of making points, knives and scrapers. The debris found most often in the archaeological record during the Archaic period.
- Effigy *n.* a likeness or image of a person or animal
- Ethnology *n.* the science that analyzes and compares human cultures, as in social structure, language, religion and technology.
- Flotilla *n.* a small fleet; a fleet of small craft
- Hammock *n.* a tract of forested land that arises above an adjacent marsh in the southern United States.
- Indigenous *adj.* originating and living or occurring naturally in an area or environment
- Paleoindian *n.* a member of the Paleo-American peoples who were the earliest human inhabitants of North America and South America during the late Pleistocene epoch.

Pleistocene *n.* a time period that spanned from 1.8 million to 11,000 years ago when the most recent ice ages took place. Distinctive large mammals such as mastodons and mammoths were extinct by the end of the Pleistocene. However, early *Homo sapiens* continued to expand to most of the world.

Prehistory *n.* time without written records; the time periods prior to the arrival of Europeans in Florida in 1513

Sessile *adj.* permanently attached or fixed; not free-moving

Woodland Period *n.* introduced in the 1930s as a generic heading for prehistoric sites falling between the Archaic hunting and gathering and the temple mound-building Mississippian cultures in the eastern United States. By the early 1960s, Woodland sites were generally characterized as those that regularly produced pottery and constructed burial mounds that contained elaborate grave goods.

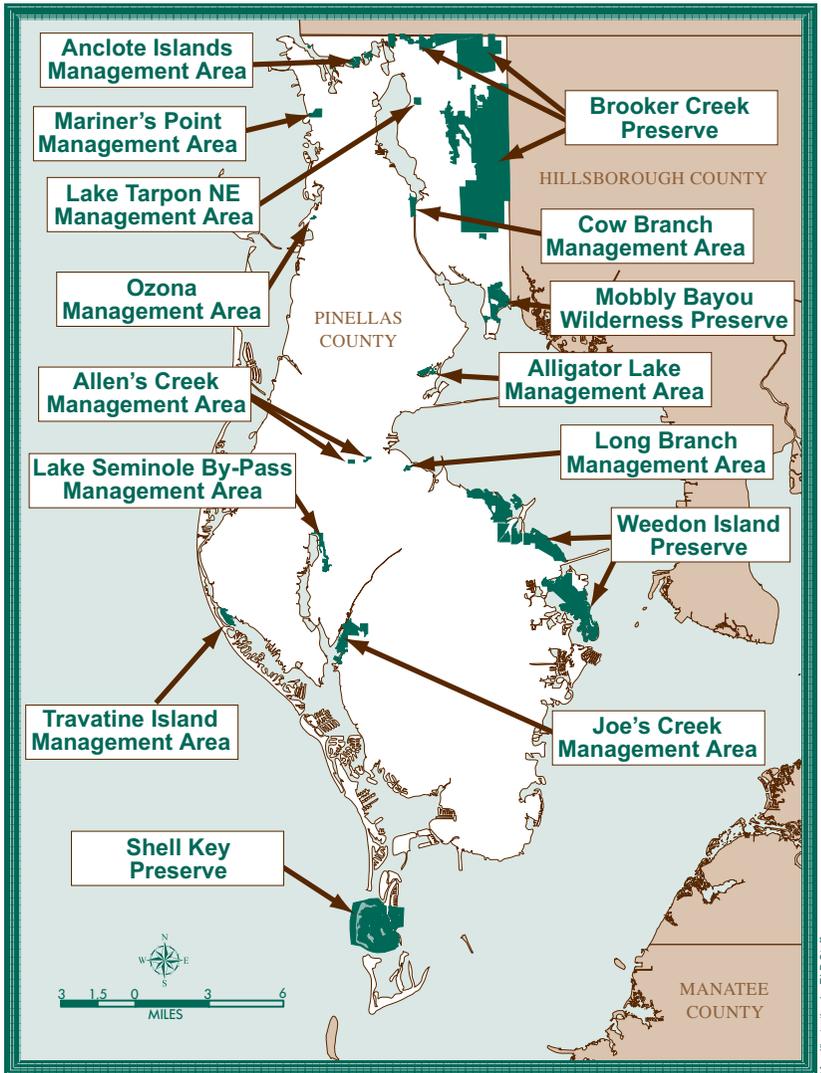
Xeric *adj.* characterized by or adapted to an extremely dry habitat

Xerophytic *adj.* adapted to a xeric (dry) environment



Illustration courtesy of Elizabeth Nelly

An osprey lands on its nest as visitors paddle by.



Map illustration by ELD Staff.

Figure 5. Preserves and management areas within Pinellas County, Florida.

ABOUT THE ENVIRONMENTAL LANDS DIVISION

During the late 1960s and early 1970s, the residents of Pinellas County recognized the need to protect and restore the County's rich natural heritage. Pinellas County responded with an initiative that brought together volunteers from governments, environmental groups, architects, planners, and private citizens to identify and prioritize environmental lands within the County for protection, potential acquisition and management. In 1972, the *Red Flag Charrette* was published and, over the next three decades, the recommendations provided by this document guided the acquisition of environmental lands. Weedon Island Preserve was a part of this effort and stands today as a testament to the foresight of our predecessors.

In response to management needs, the Environmental Lands Division (ELD) was established with a mission to provide sound stewardship to the County's wild lands and opportunities for the appreciation of their intrinsic value. The ELD is part of Pinellas County Department of Environmental Management and shares the overall mission of providing responsible leadership necessary to manage our natural and urban environment to meet the needs of the present and future citizens of Pinellas County.

Currently, the ELD manages four preserves, including Weedon Island Preserve, and 11 management areas (Figure 5). Pinellas County preserves and management areas are designated wild areas that are managed for the conservation, protection and enhancement of natural and cultural resources while allowing for passive recreational uses that are compatible with approved management plans and applicable ordinances.

As you experience and enjoy Weedon Island Preserve, please remember that places like this exist due to the continued support of Pinellas County government, its citizens and partners, and people like you.



Department of Environmental Management

Environmental Lands Division

3620 Fletch Haven Drive

Tarpon Springs, FL 34688

Phone: (727) 453-6900

Fax: (727) 453-6902

www.pinellascounty.org/environment

Citizen-based support for the preservation of Weedon Island Preserve, including the Weedon Island Preserve Cultural and Natural History Center, is possible through the Friends of Weedon Island, Inc., a not-for-profit organization with over 150 members. For more information, please contact:

Friends of Weedon Island, Inc.

1800 Weedon Drive NE

St. Petersburg, FL 33702

www.fowi.org



www.pinellascounty.org/environment



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