

PINELLAS PARK

GEORGE WASHINGTON DIDN'T SLEEP HERE!

With the advent of the BiCentennial in 1975 to celebrate our nations 200th anniversary – many cities like ours – have been urged to compile a history of its beginnings.

In 1970 – the real groundwork was laid down for a permanent display at the public library of pictures, old newspapers and morabilia collected and give to the city. The project will be completed by 1975 by members of the Pinellas Park Woman's Club and you are all invited to stop by and see the display and watch it grow.

Nearly every community from Boston to Yorktown can boast with a plaque "George Washington slept her". Well, Pinellas Park is only an infant in history – in August of 1914 the area known as Pinellas Park applied to the State of Florida for a city charter and Governor Park Trammell appointed Harold Brennan as Mayor until the town could have their first election after the charter was approved. The first Town Council meeting was held October 17, 1914 and P.J. McDevitt was elected as first Mayor. Mr. McDevitt served for 3 years and was succeeded by James Shoecraft who not only served as Mayor of Pinellas Park very ably for 35 years, but also served the county as County Commissioner for many years.

For the real beginnings of Pinellas Park, we must go back to 1909 or 1910 when a wealthy manufacturing family named Disston from Philadelphia, Pa., purchased 4 ½ million acres of land in Florida for 25¢ an acre. The Florida Association was incorporated under a charter of the State of Delaware and maintaining business offices at St. Petersburg, filed with C.M. Knott, Clerk of Hillsborough County on May 31, 1911.

The Association bought 12,800 acres from the Disston family for the purpose of creating Pinellas Farms. The land was offered to prospective buyers was that of a ten acre farm costing \$200.00 or \$20.00 an acre with a free house lot in the town of Pinellas Park, Florida. By 1912 they were selling from \$40.00 to \$100.00 per acre and included a town lot or \$150.00 for the town alone.

The city consisted of an acre enclosed by the present 58th Street on the East, by 66th Street on the West, 70th Avenue on the South and 80th Avenue on the North.

Three model farms were created, the purpose to encourage the members of the community to improve farming methods and to encourage the raising of sugar cane.

Between April 15, 1910 and April 19, 1912, the Florida Association sold one hundred and eleven farms and lots. An extensive advertising campaign, principally in Pennsylvania, was conducted. Although the Pinellas Farms and the town were located on the Atlantic Coast Railroad, most of the families found the best way to travel to Florida was to go to Baltimore, Maryland where they would board a boat to Jacksonville and from there come to Pinellas Park by railroad.

The first group of 52 settlers arrived from Pennsylvania on Friday, September 16, 1910. Included in the group were tradesmen, a minister, a doctor, a barber, a carpenter, music teacher and several school teachers. They came to a jungle of palmetto and pine trees and swampland. Some lived in tents, while others stayed at the Colony House especially built for new residents to stay while their own homes were being built.

The Old Colony House consisted of two rectangular shaped buildings with porches, one of which served as the dining room and the other as a rooming house. Mr. and Mrs. Lewis Bender ran the dining room from 1911 to 1912. These were located just south of the ACL track on the site of the present Davis Field and behind it was the Sugar Syrup Mill in construction.

The "help" in building the houses and the mill were provided sleeping quarters near the Colony House and were called the Yellow Houses.

The Colony House was the scene of the first social activities and church services and although it served as a Community Church, the first services were conducted by the Presbyterian minister and at the early date they built the first Presbyterian Church, facing North close to 60th Street and South of the Sugar and Syrup Mill. The first Catholic Church in Pinellas County was built here. The building was later torn down and the wood was used to build the recreation building of St. Paul's School in St. Petersburg. The First Methodist Church was built and then disbanded after 5 years.

Dr. Wyman, of the University of Florida, were secured by the Florida Association to direct the operation of its Model Farms and to conduct classes for the settlers. In addition to sugar cane, many acres of corn, cotton, peanuts, sweet potatoes, flowers, strawberries and other garden vegetables were grown. Several hundred acres of land were planted for sugar cane to be harvested and processed by the local sugar-syrup mill.

This venture was not successful and by late 1913 the mill was taken apart and the machinery dismantled. The most plausible account offered for its failure was by Mrs. James Shoecraft who said the mill was too large. "If you had planted every acre of Pinellas County in

sugar cane, it still would not have been enough to supply the mill." The result of course, was that the labor and overhead costs were prohibitive. The building simply sat there and deteriorated and was finally demolished during the hurricane of 1921.

The population was then reduced from 250 to 60. Mr. McDevitt of the Florida Association offered assistance to any who wished to return to their home state. Colonel Byers who operated the general store extended credit to many of the diehards who remained and is credited with keeping the town from folding up completely. His generosity was paid back in full.

Other businesses remained. The German Bakery, owned by Mr. Frank Krise was located at the present site of the Feed Store. A hardware store, The Pinellas Mercantile Company, was located just north of the present City Hall, where the first Post Office was located 1910 with "Doc" Vogel being the first Postmaster. The Royal Palm Hotel was built by a Mr. Bean for Howard Reese who advertised his tourist hotel "as a Health Resort Among the Pines". (Still in family, Beaux Arts Theater). M.W. Ulmer operated a turpentine still on 66th Street...Prison labor was used in this operation. The Pinellas Novelty Works, specializing in stair work and also manufactured mission furniture, store fixtures and general contracting. Etlers Poultry and the Billiard Hall and Barber Shop.

Cattle took over the acres of farms and the ranging of livestock became quite a problem within the town limits and a pound had to be built. Open range for cattle and livestock continued for many years and it was not until the late 40's that it was finally eliminated by a State Legislative Act.

The Shoecraft family grew the first statice in this area - it is dried and used in Florida arrangements. It became the Statice Capital of the World and even today their nephew Milton "Buzz" Badger is still growing flowers on 58th Street and shipping to markets all over the Country. Those dried flowers that your teenagers have decorated their rooms with, could very well have originated here in Pinellas Park.

The first school was built in 1912. It was a one room, brown, one story building with a porch. Miss Nell Byers taught about 25-30 pupils, grades 1 thru 8. In 1915, a four room school house was built which is now serving as our City Hall. Students graduated from the 8th grade and they went to High School in St. Petersburg. Leaving each morning at 7 A.M. and returning home at 6 P.M. Some things never seem to change - but we have great hopes for the new Pinellas Park High School which will be completed in late 1975.

It was interesting to note the first school, that by law they were only entitled to the services of a teacher for 6 months, based on

the number of students in attendance. Whereupon the members of the Civic League subscribed funds necessary to pay the additional months teachers salary.

A Volunteer Fire Company was originated in 1912. The first Fire Hall was located on the site of the old Boys Club, 62nd Street across from Davis Field. There were 8 volunteer fireman (Homer Badger, Jim Shoecraft, Brace Slater, Walt Bender, O.G. Bender, and Edward Hoffman and Frank Miller) The latter two were very essential – they had the only teams of gorses in town.

Our first of many great Civic Organizations was founded and called the Civic League, whose membership was restricted to owners of Pinellas Farms. They paid yearly dues, both men and women had a vote in matters coming up for action. This became the Board of Trade, May 1, 1913 – todays Chamber of Commerce.

These were the people who built the first community building – used as a dance hall, and auditorium, city hall, a woman's club and last as the Boys Club before it was finally dismantled a few years ago.

The Pinellas park Drainage District was formed in 1914 with the Florida Association acting as guarantors for the sale of bonds. The equipment was assembled at McIntire's Bayhead. This bayhead can now be identified in part as Shoecraft Park.

The dredge was owned by John Campbell, and several canals were bug in order to supply drainage for the whole area. The children and the citizens of the community knew each one by its number. One early resident, Buzz Badger, who came here as a boy, told us that the first year they lived in their home before the ditches were started, that during the rainy season, they could fish from their porch under the house.

Ab Bender, who was a year old when his family came here, told us about the Bunn Family who lived over near Long Bayou where the Seminole Golf Course is now. There was no bridge to the farm and they had to take their goods and stores across the water in a wagon, if the water was high, they would have trouble with the boxes floating off the wagon. Without the drainage ditches, Pinellas park could not survive.

The Town's electric light plant was completed in March 1914 and in the libraries collection is a ledger for the years of 1926-27. The average light bill for a family residence ranged from \$1 to \$2 a month. The electric light plant operated on a one cylinder gasoline motor. The lights were to be on from dusk. The cutting off of the lights usually depended on the poker game sin the plant.

Peanuts were roasted on the manifold. When the games were lively, the lights burned late. Poor "hands" and the shortage of peanuts got the lights turned off – on schedule.

Between 1915 and 1922 the population grew to several hundred persons, due to the low cost of land and our access to the beaches.

By 1925 the town was booming. There were paved streets and a population of 2000. A town clerk was appointed.

Between 1928 and 1935, our Town, barely held its own. With hard times, many people left to seek employment elsewhere. Houses were moved from the Park to St. Petersburg and the Beaches.

Between 1940 and 1960, the town became a city. There was a Police Chief and force, a new fire hall, new fire trucks, and a new elementary school was built. Long awaited sewers were a reality. Park Boulevard became a four-lane highway.

A shopping center, blocks of office buildings were built, housing developments had sprung up in every direction.

Now in the 1970's we find beautiful modern schools that are a fry cry from the little brown schoolhouse with its smaller framehouse "outback" and the water buckets have been replaced by drinking fountains. The new Public Works building, the new Library and in the near future, the new City Hall completed. The older homes are far and few between, gradually being torn down in the way of progress and replaced by modern ranch type homes. The dairies have moved out and there are one or two flower farms still in existence. Our population has reached well over 28,000 and still growing. New Industries have favored us, we are a community of young families, many descending from the first families.

So George didn't sleep here! We'll still make our mark in history. Thanks to those early pioneer families who stayed and built and prospered and now sleep in the old Sunnyside Cemetery on 54th Avenue of St. Petersburg.

Dorothy M. Boyer