

Amelia Island recalls its past

By Barbara Gavan
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As people from Northeast Florida and Southeast Georgia come to Amelia Island for the Isle of Eight Flags Shrimp Festival this weekend, they know one thing: There will be plenty of shrimp to eat.

But what about the other part of the festival name? Why is it called the Isle of Eight Flags? A history lesson is available at the Amelia Island Museum of History.

"The next island, the fairest of this province, I call Amelia," wrote James Oglethorpe to the Duke of Newcastle, in a letter dated April 17, 1736.

Today, Amelia Island, with its 13 miles of unsullied beaches and 40-foot dunes, lush golf courses and old Victorian homes, retains much of its charm.

"Amelia Island has not forgotten its past," said Marlene Schang, associate director/curator of the museum. "We live with our history and celebrate it."

The museum introduces visitors to the history of the "Isle of Eight Flags" through narration and live interpretation, personalized by museum artifacts. As the only territory in the U.S. under the dominion of eight flags during the past five centuries, it absorbed much from each culture.

Before the first flag flew above the island, the Timucua inhabited the area they called Napoyca. From around 2500 B.C. to 1562 A.D., they lived with an abundance of vegetation and shellfish. They had no written language, but are believed to have lived long, healthy lives, due in part to their diet but primarily because of the absence of European diseases.

French and Spanish

Their way of life continued for centuries, until the arrival of a company of Frenchmen, led by Jean Ribault, on May 3, 1562.

Ribault had sailed for the New World in search of a site for a Huguenot colony. When he came upon the island, he claimed it for France and named it the Isle de Mai, for the month in which he discovered it. The French lived in relative harmony with the Timucua until they were bloodily defeated by the Spanish troops of Pedro Menendez de Aviles in 1565.

The eight flags that have flown over Amelia Island now fly in front of the Florida House Inn in Fernandina Beach.

-- Reggie Jarrett/special

Renamed Santa Maria by the Spanish conquerors, the island changed a lot during the nearly 200 years of Spanish possession. The Timucua were used mainly as farm labor, although they reportedly were well-treated by Spanish missionaries, who converted many to Catholicism. But the Timucua also rapidly succumbed to the newly imported diseases from Europe, principally smallpox and measles. Although the remaining Timucua still lived on Santa Maria, their council house was replaced by a wooden church.

In 1607, English Protestants began their settlement at Jamestown and made their way southward to become firmly entrenched in Carolina as well, where Charles Towne was founded in 1670. That same year, the Treaty of Madrid between England and Spain delineated the boundaries of each nation's territories in the New World. However, the land between Carolina and St. Augustine, including Amelia Island, was not addressed and would remain in contention, leading to violent encounters between the military attachments of both powers. The island, because of its natural deep-water harbor and central location, became a haven for smugglers running illegal goods between Charleston, S.C., and St. Augustine.

English arrive

When James Oglethorpe, founder of the debtors' colony in Georgia, went on a scouting expedition southward in 1736, he came upon the island that he called the "fairest and fruitfulest," naming it for Princess Amelia Sophia Eleanora, the third daughter of his king, George II. Oglethorpe intended to claim the island for England, but there were many more years of military engagements between the English and Spanish troops before the Treaty of Paris in 1763 gave England possession of the entire Florida territory.

England's jurisdiction introduced the southern plantation system with gifts of large land holdings for development. The Earl of Egmont, John Perceval, was awarded 10,000 acres of Amelia Island. He died seven years later and his wife took over the running of the plantation from England, with assistance of the plantation manager, Stephen Egan.

Egan planted and harvested indigo and, eventually, got into the naval stores' business, other agriculture, carpentry and animal husbandry. The entire island flourished during this period. Spanish oranges and English-adopted plantains were introduced to the agriculture of the area.

The short period of agrarian progress and relative peace ended with the American Revolution. After the war, under the second Treaty of Paris, Florida was given back to Spain in 1784 in return for support during the war.

Historical re-enactments are held at Civil War-era Fort Clinch on Amelia Island.

-- M. Jack Luedke/file

British settlers were given 18 months to leave the territory. Many wealthy planters with slaves left for the British West Indies. Others with lesser means simply took transport ships across the sound to Cumberland Island. By 1785, Amelia Island had been emptied completely of its British inhabitants and was again under the Spanish flag.

During the period of Spanish rule from 1784 to 1821, many of the former British settlers returned to their homes and became naturalized Spanish citizens. The Spanish, desperate to re-populate the Amelia Island area, welcomed them and integrated them fully into the island's life.

One of these, George J.F. Clarke, served as lieutenant governor and surveyor general of East Florida from his home on Amelia Island. It was he who looked at the unstructured mass of ramshackle houses, sheds and footpaths known as the Amelia Island Post and envisioned a well-planned town spreading out around it.

He took his ideas to Gov. Enrique White, who agreed to the proposal and gave the infant town the name Fernandina, a feminized diminutive of the name Ferdinand, after the Spanish King Ferdinand VII. Shops, businesses and residences sprang up and the town became a thriving enterprise. It also was during this time that the booming new town became known as the "Spanish Hussy," because of the proliferation of saloons and bordellos.

Patriot flag

During a short gap in the period of Spanish rule, the Patriot flag flew over Amelia Island in 1812 and 1813. In order to neutralize a British threat to Spanish Florida, President Madison sent Gen. George Matthews and a band of "patriots" to take Amelia Island, with its important harbor, but also to conceal the fact that the United States was behind the raid.

On March 17, 1812, the Patriots took the town with no bloodshed or loss of life and raised their own flag over Fernandina, with the intent of turning the territory over to the United States when the rest of eastern Florida was conquered. Instead, President Madison received many official protests from both Spanish and English officials and gave in to the pressure, relieving Matthews of his mission and repudiating his actions.

Broken-hearted, Matthews died three months later. A little more than a year after the takeover, Spanish rule of Amelia Island resumed.

But life on the island was not peaceful for long. Another self-proclaimed visionary sought to free Amelia Island from Spanish rule in order to then turn it over to the United States. Gen. Gregor MacGregor had worked hand-in-hand with Simon Bolivar and the Venezuelan armies in the cause of South American independence and was now turning his sites toward Amelia Island.

With the help of spies within the Spanish garrison, MacGregor was able to determine that the occupying force consisted of barely 60 men, many of whom were in poor health. He also was able to spread rumors throughout the town, targeting, eventually, the ear of the garrison commander, to the effect that a force of more than 1,000 men was preparing to attack.

When he actually marched on the fort with his force of 50, the commander, Francisco Morales, struck his own flag and departed in fear. MacGregor's family flag, a green cross on a white ground, was raised over the fort and the town of Fernandina Beach on June 29, 1817.

Amelia did not flourish during MacGregor's occupation, did not become a U.S. territory and was not properly defended. By September of the same year, faced with the threat of a Spanish attack, MacGregor abandoned his planned conquest of Florida and left the island with a force of about 25 men to defend it.

Amelia Island's trauma was just beginning. Only a few weeks later, another opportunist saw the island as an easily conquerable territory. Luis Aury, a Frenchman who had championed the revolutionary Republic of Mexico, sailed into the harbor and claimed Amelia Island for Mexico.

Again, the new government was short-lived. On Oct. 31, President Monroe sent forces to take Amelia from Mexico and its representative, Aury. After an exchange of contentious letters between Aury and representatives of the president, Aury realized that his position was untenable and ceded the island to the U.S. on Dec. 23,

1817. After taking Amelia, U.S. troops swept further into Florida, convincing the Spanish governor that his cause was hopeless as well and, in 1821, all of Florida became part of the United States.

In the space of only nine months, five different flags had flown over tiny Amelia Island.

Calm before storm

A period of relative stability and growth followed for Amelia Island. During this period, the city of Fernandina was incorporated, the Amelia Island Lighthouse was built and David Levy brought his dreams to the area.

After four years of training in plantation management, and after being admitted to the bar, Levy was elected to the Florida Legislature and, in 1841, went to Washington as a congressional delegate for the territory of Florida. He had grand plans for the territory. He saw Florida becoming a state and a commercial power with a cross-state railroad. On March 3, 1845, the first part of his vision came true as Florida was admitted to the Union as its 27th state.

Also in 1845, David Levy became the first Jewish senator elected. Perhaps to deflect the prejudices of the day, Levy changed his name to Yulee, which he had just discovered was his father's true name.

He soon married Nannie Wickliffe, the daughter of Charles Wickliffe, a former Kentucky governor and postmaster general, who heartily approved of Yulee's plans for the cross-Florida railroad. He envisioned Fernandina as the east coast terminus of his railroad, since it boasted the state's only Atlantic harbor able to handle deep draft ships. The Gulf Coast terminus would be Cedar Key.

As the railroad construction inched across the state, the town of Fernandina also was starting on a journey toward becoming, as Yulee envisioned it, the "Newport of the South." Business was booming. Merchants were building shops, public works projects were underway, and churches, homes and hotels were built.

On June 12, 1860, the railroad was finished.

But, once again, peace and prosperity were short-lived. On Jan. 11, 1861, Florida voted to secede from the Union. Ten days later, Yulee confirmed this decision in the Senate. Florida's governor immediately ordered the unfinished federal Fort Clinch to be manned by the state militia. The U.S. flag was removed from the fort and the island.

The militia occupied the fort for 11 months, but no further defense was offered by the Confederacy. On March 3, 1862, Fort Clinch was abandoned. Forces under the command of Adm. Samuel F. Du Pont entered the harbor and witnessed the raising of the U.S. flag over the fort that evening.

Fortunes change

After the Civil War, the railroad fell into disuse when Yulee served time in prison for an allegedly treasonous letter written while he was senator. Fernandina was unable to return to its previous level of prosperity.

After years of political turmoil, the railroad became the Atlantic, Gulf and West India Transit Company, and a twice-daily train was added in 1877. Soon, travelers from New York were heading for Amelia Island. Fernandina was well on its way to becoming the "Queen of Summer Resorts," as it was named in an 1896 issue of American Resorts.

A golden age of prosperity followed, but, again, circumstances beyond the control of Amelia's citizens affected their lives and livelihoods. Developer and industrialist Henry Flagler began planning a new railroad running north and south along Florida's East Coast. Its presence, and that of the resort and tourist hotels it would engender, virtually could ensure the growth and prosperity of the areas it covered. When Flagler bypassed Amelia Island with his new railroad, the golden age was over and almost all building and modernization came to a halt.

Although lean years were the result of the bypass, much of the island became frozen in time at that point, allowing it to remain an authentic Victorian seaport village. It was not until the early part of the 20th century that Amelia Island, because of its natural deep-water harbor, gave birth to the modern shrimping industry. Today, nearly 80 percent of Florida's Atlantic white shrimp are harvested in Amelia's waters. And one of the biggest festivals of the Southeastern coast is Fernandina Beach's Isle of Eight Flags Shrimp Festival, attracting upward of 150,000 people each year.

Fernandina also boasts the world's largest producer of handmade shrimp nets, the Burbank Trawl Makers/Standard Marine. The net house, just blocks from the marina, supplies more than 2,500 nets yearly to buyers from Africa to South America, all made the old-fashioned way, by hand.

Another high point in Amelia Island's diverse history was the creation of American Beach in the 1930s by the founders of Afro-American Life Insurance. They bought 200 acres on the southern end of Amelia Island to function as an oceanfront haven for African-Americans during an era of rigid segregation.

At the height of the resort's popularity, its homes and nightspots were frequented by celebrities like Ray Charles, Cab Calloway and James Brown. With around 100 homes from the 1940s and '50s still in existence today, American Beach remains a quiet, beachfront community and the first stop on Florida's Black Heritage Trail.

The Amelia Island of today is a popular residential and resort area. In addition to the authentic Victorian homes in downtown Fernandina Beach, oceanfront homes and luxury condos provide a wide range of housing options.

And Victorian "cottages," with architectural styles ranging from the Florida Vernacular to Italianate and Chinese Chippendale, have spawned a thriving bed and breakfast industry.

Though a modern marina now graces the much fought-over harbor, and golf courses have taken the place of fields planted with indigo, the lighthouse, Fort Clinch and Florida's oldest saloon, The Palace, still stand.

Princess Amelia's isle remembers and embraces its past.