

An Island of History

Egmont Key has a rich and varied history. Before Europeans arrived in this part of Florida in 1513, led by Ponce de Leon, the Tampa Bay area was a metropolitan area of the Native American Timucuan culture. Even though hundreds of Native Americans lived, fished, and built shell mounds throughout the Bay area, we have no idea of what they did on Egmont Key, because so much has happened to the island since then. The early Spanish records have little specific information about the island, although an explorer named Celi surveyed the key in 1757 and erected a cross on the south end. Celi called Egmont Key the Island of the Cross. When the British began exploring the area in the early 1800's it was renamed Egmont Key, for John Perceval, the Earl of Egmont, a member of the Irish House of Commons, who was also related to Lord Hillsborough, for whom Hillsborough county was named.

The Spanish ceded Florida to the United State 1821, and as commerce grew along the Gulf Coast of the new country, it became necessary to build a lighthouse on Egmont Key. The new lighthouse was completed in 1848, and was at that time the only lighthouse on the west coast between St. Marks and Key West. That fall, a hurricane damaged the new lighthouse beyond repair, although it remained in use until the present lighthouse was completed 10 years later. In 1849, Col. Robert E. Lee surveyed the Gulf Coast and recommended that Egmont Key be set aside as a federal military reservation.

As the Third Seminole War drew to a close in the late 1850's, the last of the Seminoles were brought to Egmont Key and held before being transported to Oklahoma. The last of them were taken away in 1858 on the steamer "Grey Cloud".

The key remained in Union hands during the Civil War, and served as a base of operations for ships blockading the Florida coast. Several raids on Fort Brooke and Tampa were launched from the island, and a number of Union sympathizers from the Bay area moved to Egmont until the war was over, these included several farmers from the area around Pinellas Point in what is now south St. Petersburg.

As the Spanish-American War loomed in early 1898, Henry Plant a major figure in the early growth of Tampa, prevailed upon the government to fortify Egmont Key to defend Tampa from the possibility of attack by the Spanish. Fort Dade on Egmont Key and Fort DeSoto were started in the spring of 1898 with the placement of temporary artillery batteries on the both ends of the island. Although the Spanish American War was over in a few months, construction of the defenses of Tampa Bay continued. By 1910, there were 5 concrete artillery batteries, 70 buildings, a network of brick streets, water, sewer, and electricity to serve a garrison of several hundred troops. By the early 1920's artillery of the fort placed on Egmont Key was obsolete, and the Army abandoned Ft Dade.

The Coast Guard took over the island during the 1930's and built a sizable small arms practice firing range on the west side of the island. Coast Guardsmen came from all over the country during the winter to practice shooting. They used some of the buildings of what had been Ft Dade. During this time most of the rest of the buildings were destroyed by storms and fires.

During World War II, there were lookouts established by the Coast Guard, the Navy, and the Army. Ft DeSoto and Mullet Key were used as a practice bombing range. Fortunately, there was little threat to the west coast of Florida and after the War the island was looked after by the Coast Guard, until 1974 when the island was designated a National Wildlife Refuge.

In 1988, the first Coastal Cleanup was held on Egmont Key. At that time this was the largest civilian/military operation of its kind. Nearly 70 tons of accumulated trash was removed from the key. The next year the Florida Park Service entered into a co-management agreement with the US Fish and Wildlife Service, and on October 1, 1989 Egmont Key State Park was opened.

Shortly after that the Egmont Key Alliance was established as a volunteer Citizen Support Organization to help the Park Service preserve, protect, and restore the natural and cultural resources of this fascinating island.