

Jacksonville Area History

Learn how Jacksonville's history and development are linked to its beautiful climate, abundant natural resources, and ocean and river trade access.

Native Settlements

Long before Europeans first discovered the mouth of the St. Johns River where it meets the Atlantic Ocean, the Timucuan Indians lived in this densely wooded area. According to archaeologists, the Timucuan's distinctive culture developed around 500 B.C., but it is unknown whether they were descended from earlier groups or arrived from elsewhere. Because they had no written language, early accounts of the natives came from the first Europeans.

First Europeans

Tumultuous times in Europe in the early 16th century brought explorers to the shores of the New World. In 1562, a small group of French Huguenots built a settlement, Fort Caroline, on the south bank of the St. Johns, just a few miles up river from where it empties into the Atlantic. The French experience in the New World was short-lived, however, when in 1565, their fort was destroyed by the Spanish.

Spanish Reign

Having previously claimed all of the Florida peninsula and vast areas to the north, the Spanish were prompted to actively defend their territory by the French intrusion. They established Fort San Mateo on the site of the former French Fort Caroline, and it became part of their mission system, which stretched from South Carolina to St. Augustine, Florida. For nearly 200 years the Spanish converted natives to the Catholic faith and lived off the land with the help of the natives. In 1763, at the end of the Seven Years War in Europe, Spain gave control of this vast territory to the British in order to keep the city of Havana, which was more important to their New World Empire. When the Spanish left, they took the few remaining Timucuan with them.

British Influence

Though only 20 years passed before the British lost control of the Florida colony, it was an active time of development. Large land grants were issued and plantations were built along the St. Johns River to grow cotton, indigo, rice, and vegetables. Lumber was harvested to expand the mighty British navy and work began on the first road — the King's Road — from Savannah to St. Augustine. Population grew and commerce in and out of the port expanded. Spanish place names were changed to English. Most notable was the renaming of a narrow plot of land on the river to Cowford, as a place where cows could easily "ford" across the river. Many loyalists settled here during the Revolutionary War, but by 1783, the British were forced to return control of the Florida Colony to the Spanish.

Return of the Spanish

The second time the Spanish ruled the Florida colony was not as successful as the first. Most of the loyalist population left for Canada or the Caribbean, and nearby Georgians having just won their freedom from British rule, saw great opportunity to the South. The Spanish Empire was in

decline and after several attempts to oust the Spanish from the Florida colony, including intrusions by Andrew Jackson, Spain ceded its Florida holdings to the United States.

Welcome to the United States

The year 1821 marks Florida's entry to be a U.S. territory. Plantations had become important economic centers along the St. Johns River. Two settlers donated land on the north bank of Cowford to establish a "proper" town in 1822 and the site was renamed Jacksonville, in honor of the territory's first provisional governor, Andrew Jackson, who never set foot in the town, but went on to become the seventh U.S. President. Now part of an established commerce network of a new and growing country, Jacksonville exported cotton, lumber, oranges, and vegetables and received manufactured goods from the North. Jacksonville was the center of commercial activity in the territory by the time Florida gained statehood in 1845.

Civil War Years

This was a time of profound change for the fledging United States, especially in the South. Florida seceded from the Union, but there was support for both the Union and the Confederacy in Jacksonville. As a port city, Jacksonville played a major role in the Union blockade of the Confederacy and it was occupied by Union troops four times. The population grew with both freed and runaway slaves seeking safety and a new life.

Post War Recovery

As with many Southern cities, Jacksonville suffered both property damage and economic devastation due to the war. Its location as a port city again proved to be valuable, however. A new item was soon imported into the city — tourists. By the late 1800s, the area was drawing 70,000 people annually seeking a respite from the cold northern climes. Downtown hotel building expanded and communities along the beautiful beaches began to grow. As the railroad expanded south across the river, however, the tourists had a means for exploring other parts of Florida. At the same time, a yellow fever epidemic spurred tourists southward.

New Beginnings

The spark that started a devastating downtown fire in 1901 in which over 2,300 buildings burned to the ground may have ignited the trend for transformation that Jacksonville needed. From the ruins of a colonial frontier past emerged a modern skyline of concrete and stone. A public library donated by Andrew Carnegie was built in 1905. Noted New York architect Henry Klutho brought the new Prairie-style to the city. The first paved road connecting the city to the beach was opened in 1910. The new industry of film production came to the city in the early 1900s and was an important part of the economy until World War I.

Modern Developments

Growth spread from the downtown center to outlying areas in the 1920s. Fine homes and lovely parks were built along the river's north bank and expanded to the south bank after the first bridge was completed. By 1923, electric trolley cars linked the two sides. The city became a major transportation hub for those investing in the Florida land boom. Development slowed during the Great Depression, but Jacksonville's location was again responsible for its next economic boom. The buildup of three military installations during World War II made Jacksonville the Navy's third largest military complex in the country.

In 1968, the City of Jacksonville and the county of Duval merged into a single governmental unit in order to improve how services were delivered. This created an entity that is nearly 900 square miles, the largest city in land area in the contiguous United States.

In 1993, a major dream was realized when the city was awarded an NFL franchise, the Jacksonville Jaguars. In 2005, Jacksonville emerged into the international spotlight as home to Super Bowl XXXIX with a matchup of the Philadelphia Eagles versus the New England Patriots. Today, Jacksonville is a dynamic economic center offering a quality life style for residents and an exciting destination for visitors.