Florida's Historic Places: Pensacola

Pensacola has a long history. Known as the "City of Five Flags," it has been Spanish, French, British, Confederate, and American. Pensacola has actually changed hands 17 times in its more than 400 years of written history. Even before that, Native Americans lived in the area for more than 10,000 years.

Spanish Period 1513-1719
First, Panfilo de Narváez arrived in Florida to search for gold. He was disappointed in his search. He was also hassled by the native people. He returned to the coast, built crude ships, and sailed for Mexico.

Next, Francisco Maldonado waited at Pensacola for Hernando de Soto. De Soto never showed up.

Then, a Spanish expedition led by Tristan de Luna sailed 11 ships into the Gulf of Mexico. They landed near the Bay of Ochuse (Pensacola Bay) in 1559. Scouting parties found neither adequate food nor Indian settlements from which needed supplies could be obtained.

The troubles of the Spanish settlers increased when a violent storm arose. It resulted in the loss of ships, supplies, and men. In 1561, the Pensacola settlement was abandoned. It was forgotten for more than 100 years.

News of French plans for an expedition to the Gulf of Mexico in 1698 caused Spain to act. Spain again moved to occupy Pensacola. The second Spanish base at Pensacola lasted until 1719.

French Period 1719-1722
The French captured Pensacola. Before returning Pensacola to Spain, France burned it.

Spanish Period 1722-1763
During this period, little was done by Spanish authorities to develop the Pensacola colony. New fortifications were built and a new town constructed on Santa Rosa Island. But the Pensacola settlement, like that at St. Augustine, was not self-supporting. It had to rely on Spanish supplies and support routed through Havana. A hurricane destroyed the Santa Rosa Island settlement in 1752. The survivors returned to the mainland. Another hurricane damaged the mainland settlement in 1760.

British Period 1763-1781
England acquired Spanish Florida by the Treaty of Paris. The territory was divided into British East and British West Florida. Administrative centers were at St. Augustine and Pensacola. When the British entered Pensacola, they were not impressed with the town. Pensacola consisted only of some 100 shabby huts, neglected gardens, and a rotting wooden fort.

During the British period, progress was made. The town became the center of trade with the Creek and other Indian tribes in the area. Naval facilities were improved. A new fortress, Fort George, was constructed. This was important to England's control of the territory and the Gulf of Mexico. British development of Florida was hurt by the outbreak of the American Revolution.

Spanish Period 1781-1821
Spain regained control of Florida. During this period of Spanish control, Pensacola remained a small isolated settlement. A weakened Spain could not control or govern Florida effectively.

Territorial Period 1821-1845

Newly appointed territorial governor, Andrew Jackson, accepted the transfer of Florida. This took place in the Plaza Ferdinand VII at Pensacola. During the territorial period of Florida, Pensacola developed rapidly as a leading seaport. It grew as a result of its two major industries, lumber and brick making. The town still reflected its early Spanish heritage.

Statehood 1845

Florida gained statehood. At this time, Pensacola had passed St. Augustine in economic importance.

Confederate Period 1861-1865

Pensacola's progress was interrupted by the outbreak of the Civil War. The Civil War almost began at Pensacola. Ever since Florida voted to secede in 1861, Confederate forces from Alabama and Florida had been gathering in Pensacola. They talked about attacking Union-held Fort Pickens. The attack was about to happen. But before the Confederates located in Florida could attack Fort Pickens, the Confederates opened fire on Fort Sumter, South Carolina. The Civil War had begun.

Fort Pickens on Santa Rosa Island and Fort Barrancas and McRee in the Navy Yard were the city's defenses. Fort Pickens remained in Union hands. The Union blockaded the Bay of Pensacola throughout the war. Supplies could not get in or out through the bay.

Readmitted to the United States 1868

After the conclusion of the war, Pensacola's importance as a center of lumber trade and as a commercial and naval port continued. "Pensacola Pine" lumber was exported to all parts of the world. A fish, known as Red Snapper, was exported to the Northeast.

In 1914, the first United States Naval Air Station was established at Pensacola. The military became important to the economy of the area.

Pensacola's history can be revisited in the Seville Square Historic District. This includes 30 blocks in the old city area. The West Florida Museum of History provides an orientation. There are homes, shops, and museums from the 1800s. Historic Pensacola Village within the district is located on the site of a Spanish and then British fort. It offers through its architecture and exhibits a glimpse of four centuries under five flags.