

Florida's Historic Places: The Cedar Keys

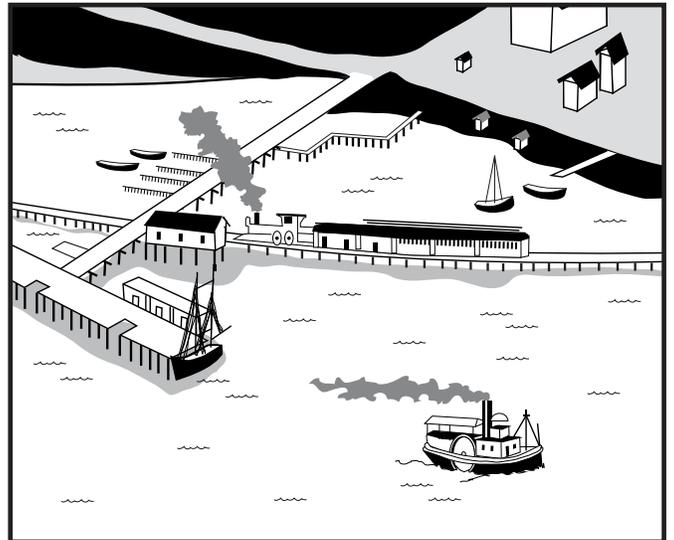
The Cedar Keys are barrier islands located on the west coast of Florida, known as the Nature Coast. The islands are at the southern tips of the Santa Fe and Suwannee Rivers as they flow into the Gulf of Mexico.

The Timucuan, Apalachee, and Creek tribes inhabited this area. Those natives left after diseases brought by the white man and the wars were absorbed into the Seminole tribe. Pirates later found and used these islands. Jean Lafitte, the pirate, visited Seashore Key around 1800, using its high land as a lookout point.

Cedar Key

Cedar Key, the rustic town on Way Key, was settled in the early 1840s. The second Seminole War was officially ended here in 1842. Soon after, steamboats filled the waterways. They carried cotton and lumber along the Gulf Coast and to foreign nations. A lighthouse built on Seahorse Key to guide merchant ships in the 1850s still stands.

With the completion of the Cross Florida Railroad, constructed by Mr. David Levy Yulee, the bustling port was connected to the Florida east coast in Fernandina. The railroad carried lumber, turpentine, cotton, seafood products, and passengers. Hotels and warehouses were built.

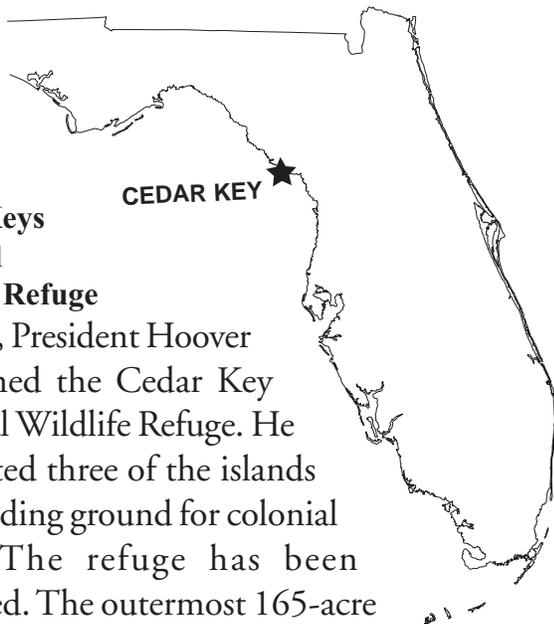


Salt was an important commodity in the 1800s. During the Civil War, salt was obtained for the Confederacy from the evaporation of seawater in kettles and boilers around Cedar Key. In 1862, a federal force attacked by sea and smashed the kettles and boilers.

Cedar Key was the second largest city in the state during the 1880s, with trains bringing hundreds of thousands of tourists. The Eagle Pencils Co. set up a factory to take advantage of the abundant cedar forests, and proceeded to make pencils, which they exported to the world. The only problem was that within a few years the cedars had all been cut down. Then, in 1896, a devastating hurricane destroyed the town and docks.

Today, Cedar Key is a haven for artists and writers, a place for tourists to relax and enjoy nature. Bird watchers have excellent results thanks to the nearby Cedar Key National Wildlife Refuge. Archeologists comb the Indian shell mound for artifacts.

The Cedar Key State Museum not only has exhibits reflecting the history of the town but also has a fine shell collection. There is even one of the remaining large kettles used to boil seawater.



Cedar Keys National Wildlife Refuge

In 1929, President Hoover established the Cedar Key National Wildlife Refuge. He designated three of the islands as a breeding ground for colonial birds. The refuge has been expanded. The outermost 165-acre Seahorse Key with its sand dune height of 52.3 feet is the highest elevation on Florida's west coast. Seahorse Key is also a prime nesting area. Boats must stay a distance away during nesting season. The island contains some of the largest heron, egret, brown pelican, and ibis nesting colonies in the south.

Natural habitats include forests of cabbage palm, red bay, live oak, and laurel oak. Plants below the forests include cherry laurel, saw palmetto, yaupon, wild olive, prickly pear, red cedar, and Spanish bayonet. There are mangrove swamps and salt marshes. At least ten reptile species share the living space with the birds.

The Cedar Keys are not the kind of place you find by accident—the lonely highway goes to them, not through them. But the Cedar Keys are well worth the trip.

John Muir

A native of Scotland, Muir came to America as a young boy. He worked at a number of jobs but the wilderness kept calling to him. In 1867, he set off from Indianapolis for the Gulf of Mexico. He wrote about his journey in the book *A Thousand Mile Walk to the Gulf*.

Once he arrived in Cedar Key, he fell ill with malaria. The young naturalist recovered in the house of a mill superintendent. He regained his strength by rowing from island to island. He wrote, "As soon as I was able to get out of bed, I crept away to the edge of the wood, and sat day after day beneath a moss-draped live oak, watching birds feeding on the shore when the tide was out. Later, as I gathered some strength, I sailed in a little skiff from one key to another."

As he watched the birds, he wrote, "It is delightful to observe the assembling of these feathered people from the woods and reedy isles; herons white as wave-tops, or blue as the sky, winnowing the warm air on wide quiet wing; pelicans coming with baskets to fill, and the multitude of smaller sailors of the air, swift as swallows, gracefully taking their places at Nature's family table for their daily bread. Happy birds!"

John Muir is sometimes called the first environmentalist. He designed the National Park System. Years later, Muir returned to Cedar Key for a nostalgic visit.