THE EARLY HISTORY OF
Hillsboro Inlet
by DAVID F. BUTLER

The first settlements in south Florida were scattered Indian villages and Bahamian fishing communities in the Keys. The presence of submerged coral reefs and frequent storms made the Atlantic coast dangerous for ships, and gradually "wreckers," specializing in salvage, settled along the coastal areas. A small settlement at Fort Lauderdale was started about 1790 by the Lewis family. When the United States acquired Florida by treaty from Spain in 1821, all lands within the territory became federal property. The Donation Act was passed in 1824 to honor claims to property occupied during Spanish rule, and a parcel of land on New River in today's Fort Lauderdale known as the "Frankee Lewis Donation" was deeded to the Lewis family through this act. After Florida entered the union in 1845, other lands were deeded to the state for internal improvements, and, as detailed later in this article, funds generated through this transfer were used to dig the Intracoastal Waterway.

Until the late nineteenth century, the area around Hillsboro Inlet was a wilderness. The white settlements on the southeast coast in the early nineteenth century were along the Indian River to the north and the New and Miami rivers and the Keys to the south. Living was very difficult due to the sandy soil, mosquitoes, and high humidity. Although the Gulf Stream waters offshore were busy sea lanes, the line of shoals and reefs off the east coast remained dangerous for shipping. Numerous shipwrecks were recorded in the region from the seventeenth century to the early years of the twentieth century. In the Hillsboro area, barrier shoals and reefs prevented access to the coast for all but very shallow draft boats.¹

After Florida became a United States territory, the federal government moved very quickly to improve maps provide some of the best documentation of early south Florida coastline conditions. However, before the first careful surveys — military and civilian — well into the nineteenth century, imprecise cartography and the frequent transposition of names labeling the various coastal waterways raised as many questions as they provided answers. Only careful interpretation and comparison of various maps can hope to clarify this confusion. In this article, David Butler cites a number of early maps to build a convincing case that the Hillsboro Inlet experienced a dramatic shift in location in the early nineteenth century, perhaps as a result of the 1846 hurricane. He traces the subsequent mapping of the inlet and the effects of the dredging of the Florida East Coast Canal and the construction of the Hillsboro lighthouse on its physical development. The drawings which accompany this article were prepared especially for Broward Legacy by Mr. Butler.

Mr. Butler has been a resident of Pompano Beach for twenty-two years. A marine engineer, he has been president of Butler Marine Technology since 1983, and is currently vice-president of the Pompano Beach Historical Society.
conditions in the coastal waters. A naval fleet was sent to clean up the pirates operating in and around the Florida Keys, and a base was established at Key West. Three sturdy brick lighthouses were quickly built along the south Florida coast — the Cape Florida Lighthouse on Key Biscayne and the first Key West Lighthouse, both completed in 1825, and an offshore lighthouse on Sand Key, near Key West, built in 1826. All three of these lighthouses used whale oil burned in a lantern with a reflector to amplify the light. Many of these early reflectors were spherical rather than parabolic, and the light was quite weak.

One of the early maps of the area which shows detail of the Hillsboro Inlet very clearly is the J. Lee Williams map of 1837. This map illustrates several very important features. The inlet opens into a lake or bay which runs northwest. A small river connects to the top of the lake along the path of the present Intracoastal Waterway. Another river, noted as the "Potomac River" runs west, directly from the bay.

This river running west directly from the inlet does not agree with the present geography of the area at all. Cypress Creek, located two and three-quarter miles south of the present inlet, is a natural river running west, and matches the "Potomac River" shown on the early maps quite well. The only other natural river running west is the Hillsboro River, which is located four miles north of the present inlet. From this evidence, it seems very probable that in the early nineteenth century Hillsboro Inlet was south of its present location, and received its primary drainage from Cypress Creek.

Another interesting map appeared in a British atlas published in 1834. Hillsboro Inlet (R. Seco) is shown by the arrow added to the illustration. This map accurately shows the basic orientation of the inlet, and its connection to a lake to the north agrees with the Williams map of 1837. Note that this map also shows a connection with the
"Potomac River," but, in this case, the river flows directly to the inlet rather than to the upper end of the lake. Unlike the Williams map, this British map also shows Lake Okeechobee, placed somewhat southwest of its actual location and labeled "Lake Macaco."

This British map supports the theory that Hillsboro Inlet in the early nineteenth century was actually located two and three-quarter miles south of its present location. This theory is supported by the positions of R. Seco and the Potomac River, which follow the east-west course of the present Cypress Creek. As in the later Williams map, they do not correlate with the position of the Hillsboro River to the north of the inlet.

The brick lighthouse at Key Biscayne achieved the distinction of being the only lighthouse in the United States attacked by Indians. It was set on fire and the keeper's assistant killed in 1836, during the Second Seminole War. In 1838, the U. S. War Department produced a map of south Florida for use in the military campaigns, which by that time had penetrated deep into the lower peninsula. On this map, Hillsboro Inlet connects to a river running north and another river running northwest, further supporting the theory that in the 1830s the inlet was located two and three-quarter miles south, at the present site of Lake Santa Barbara and Cypress Creek.

A terrible natural tragedy struck south Florida in 1846. A powerful hurricane swept the Keys and the lower east coast, causing great damage. The lighthouse at Key West was undermined and toppled over. Fourteen people who had taken refuge there were killed; only the keeper survived. Out on Sand Key, the waves broke through the sea wall and toppled the lighthouse, killing the keeper and her five children.

The War Department's 1838 map shows the coastal strand and the Everglades very clearly. The coastal strand is depicted with trees, and the Everglades as swampland. Subsequent maps indicate that the tremendous forces unleashed by the 1846 hurricane not only destroyed the two solid brick lighthouses in the Keys, but also closed the Hillsboro Inlet at Lake Santa Barbara and opened the inlet in its present location two and three-quarter miles to the north. This location is clearly documented on army topographical maps from the Third Seminole War and on the War Department's 1856 Ives map of south Florida.

Maps contrasting the Everglades in 1870 and 1970 were drawn by Richard Harrison in 1970. Harrison's 1870 map was based on five historical sources, including army, U.S. Geological Survey, and General Land Office maps. This meticulously detailed map shows natural inlets at Miami, New River, Hillsboro Inlet, and two channels into Lake Worth.

Harrison's study of the topography of the east coast of Florida shows a "coastal strand" of sand, rock, and shrubs along much of the shore. The tremendous amounts of rain which fell on this coastal strand, in addition to the pressure of water from the Everglades to the west, forced numerous drainage openings into the ocean. Harrison documents a line of barrier islands and peninsulas along the coast separated from the mainland by tidal lakes and rivers. The peninsula of Hillsboro Beach is a typical formation with a natural river extending north from Hillsboro Inlet to Boca Raton. This river is now part of the Intracoastal Waterway. Palm Beach was another typical formation which formed as an island rather than as a peninsula.

A very interesting survey of the Hillsboro Inlet and river was made in 1884. A U.S. Coast and Geological Survey expedition aboard the sloop Steadfast studied the inlet in detail and made many soundings there. The details of the soundings reveal
Dipper dredge similar to those used on the Florida East Coast Canal.

the time and painstaking effort that went into this survey, and the resulting map can be taken as quite accurate. The field notes were reviewed and the map "plotted and drawn" in March 1885. The data was then verified one year later, in March 1886.

As discussed above, early maps show a pattern of disconnected waterways running north and south inside southeast Florida’s barrier islands and peninsulas. Canal building occupied much attention throughout the nation in the pre-railroad era of the early nineteenth century, and ideas for creating canals for transportation in Florida were a logical step in the territory’s development. Thus, surveys for a north-south inland waterway along the east coast were made as early as 1843.

The major problems faced by the territorial and succeeding state government were the lack of financing to build a canal and the lack of business to cover expenses once it was built. A major step in solving these problems was a federal law passed in 1850 and entitled “An Act to enable the State of Arkansas and other states [including Florida] to reclaim the 'swamp lands' within their limits.” This act, commonly known as the “Swamp and Overflowed Lands Act,” transferred federal lands to the states for improvement into usable farm land by drainage.  

Seizing this opportunity, the Florida Legislature, on January 6, 1855, approved “An Act to provide for and encourage a liberal system of internal improvements of this State.” This was a far-sighted way to develop swampy wilderness with limited capital.  

Despite these auspicious beginnings, however, the Third Seminole War, the Civil War, and Reconstruction delayed putting this legislation into widespread practical use for nearly a generation.

In 1874, additional legislation was passed to provide for grants of land to railroad and canal companies which would construct transportation routes in the peninsula. By 1881, a private company, the Florida East Coast Canal and Transportation Company, was chartered to dig a canal from Jacksonville to Biscayne Bay. The canal was to be fifty feet wide and a minimum of five feet deep. The canal company was to receive 3,840 acres of land for each mile of canal constructed.  

Most of south Florida remained undeveloped in the late nineteenth century. The center of the region was the water-covered Everglades, and the rich mucklands around Lake Okeechobee were underwater. Some prairie land, primarily used as cattle range, stretched north and west of the lake and along natural river valleys to the Gulf coast. On the Atlantic side, the coastal strand formed a thin strip of primarily rock and sand with pine and scrub vegetation. Canal dredging started between St. Augustine and Daytona in 1883. Not until the 1890s did the work reach Hillsboro Inlet, nearly 300 miles to the south. The 340.3 mile canal was finished to Biscayne Bay in 1914. Over half its length utilized existing lakes and rivers to reduce required dredging, but nearly 13,000,000 cubic yards of material were removed by steam-powered bucket dredges. It was a colossal project requiring thirty-one years. At times the work stopped due to lack of capital. By the time the canal reached Hillsboro Inlet it was already obsolete as the primary carrier of goods, since the railroad reached Miami in 1896. It is not surprising that the private canal company changed hands several times and eventually went into receivership in 1923.

The canal was purchased with state funds, and title was transferred to the federal government as part of the Intracoastal Waterway system between 1927 and 1931. Between 1950 and 1965, the Intracoastal Waterway was increased to a 125 foot width and a ten foot depth.

Each year, from 1885 on, the Federal Lighthouse Board submitted a recommendation to Congress that $90,000 be appropriated for a lighthouse to be built at Hillsboro Inlet. A light at this position would allow vessels a safe transition from the

Cross-section diagram of the Florida East Coast Canal, showing original dimensions.
In addition, sixteen diagonal braces ran from the base to the horizontal pipes at the first level. Each level was thus tied into the others to make an immensely strong steel structure. The lighthouse was completed in March 1907, and at the time represented the very latest in engineering and construction technology. Four basic ideas guided the design and installation of the lighthouse. First, pre-fabricate the structure for easier assembly in a very difficult and remote location with few support services available. Second, design the structure using “grid-type” bridge building techniques, making it tremendously strong, yet able to “flex.” Third, minimize the area for hurricane winds to blast against with a network structure through which most wind would pass. Finally, anchor the structure into a solid foundation. The Carysfort Reef light in Monroe County, which was well offshore, had been screwed into solid coral under the sandbars. Similarly, the Hillsboro light, which sat on an exposed sand point, was anchored to the underlying coral reef.

A view of Hillsboro Inlet taken from the air in 1925 shows the changes which shaped the area during the first quarter of the twentieth century. This picture was taken almost twenty years after the erection of the lighthouse, and a jetty had been installed to stabilize the southwest side of the channel. The diagram printed here has been carefully re-drawn from the original aerial photograph, and shows that the inner harbor was very different from the way it appears in modern times. There was also much more beach surrounding the lighthouse.

Wahoo Bay, shown on the map of 1884, was very large and extended quite far south. The Intracoastal Waterway was hidden behind a very heavy grove of trees in the middle of the illustration. The land in the background was wooded, and most of Pompano was farmland. There were 25,600 acres of farmland in use in the vicinity as late as 1947.

The 1925 picture clearly shows shoaling north of the 400 foot jetty. Completion of the Intracoastal Waterway greatly increased tidal flow
usually scoured an adequate channel which would allow access to small vessels. Early dredging of the inlet is not well documented, and appears to have been done periodically by private parties when they needed more water to get their commercial fishing boats out. At times charter boat captains would reportedly band together and dig the channel out by hand or, more likely, by propellor dredging at low tide. There were substantial buildings on the beach north of the lighthouse in 1925, but the beach south of the inlet had only low vegetation, and was largely undeveloped.

Hillsboro Inlet, like much of Broward County and south Florida, has been shaped and re-shaped by both nature and man during much of its history. The continually changing landscape and waterways of the region have provided a varied backdrop for over two centuries of distinctive history, and witnessed the transformation from an isolated wilderness to a modern resort and population center.

Hillsboro Inlet and vicinity, 1925.

Notes

2. Ibid.
3. Unfortunately, the Office of the Surveyor General's surveys neither confirm nor contradict the theory that the inlet changed locations in 1846. George MacKay, who surveyed the present Broward County area in 1845, only delineated the south boundary of Township 48 South, Range 42 East. The detail of that section, showing the Hillsboro Inlet at its present location, was filled in by Marcellus A. Williams in 1870. See Joe Knetisch, "The Surveys of George MacKay: A Drawer of Lines on the Map of South Florida," paper for the Dade County Chapter of the Florida Society of Professional Land Surveyors, 1984, MS in the Broward County Historical Commission archives.
4. Act of Congress (1850), approved September 28, 1850, United States Statutes at Large, vol. 9, 519-520.
5. Florida Statutes, Acts of 1855, Chapter 610, Sections 616, 617, 620.
7. Ibid.
9. Photograph of Pompano Beach in 1925, printed in Hi Riser, vol. 7, no. 49 (1965)