

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 ship-

wrecks 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.

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