

CEDAR KEY, FLORIDA--A STUDY OF TIME AND PLACE, BOOM AND BUST

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Cedar Key, one of the numerous barrier islands that fringe the upper Gulf coast of West Florida, has had its periods of growth, decline, and (perhaps) revival. Site, situation, and timing combined to nurture and later stifle the development of this small port. Romance, legend, lore, and fiction cloud the search for authenticity (Thompson 1975). During the boom decade of 1875-1886, Cedar Key expanded in population, prosperity, and prestige until, as a city of nearly 2,000 people, it had important sea links with Havana, Key West, Mobile, and New Orleans (Fishburne 1982a, p. 19). It also served as terminus for the only trans-peninsular railroad in Florida. By the turn of the century, however, the town's fortunes had reversed, and the community assumed the role of a small fishing village of approximately 700 people--a status relatively unchanged today (Fishburne 1982b, p. 52).

The area is a submergent, irregular coastal lowland fringed by approximately one hundred small islands known collectively as the Cedar Keys. Extensive marshes and sand dunes lie inland at low elevations. Today the area is noted for wildlife, especially birds, with three of the islands comprising Cedar Key's National Wildlife Refuge. Forests with extensive stands of red cedar were once plentiful and gave the name to the island group.

The contemporary community of Cedar Key, located in Levy County on the 640 acre sand island of Way Key, lies about three miles offshore. Bridges and causeways provide links to the mainland. Tallahassee and the Tampa-St. Petersburg area lie approximately 140 miles north and south, respectively (Fig. 1). Gainesville is the nearest sizable urban area, sixty miles to the northeast. Cedar Key, not on the way to anywhere, is divorced from the mainstream of transport. Yet, tranquil and secluded today, Cedar Key was a boom town a hundred years ago.

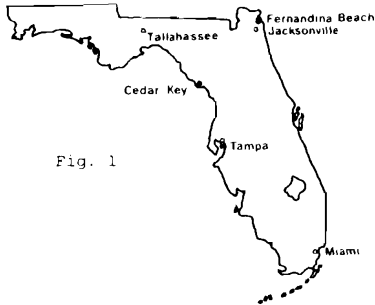


Fig. 1

The Hise

The earliest known inhabitants were pre-Columbian Timucuan Indians, followed in the 18th and 19th centuries by Creeks and later by others known as Seminoles, a term used loosely today to refer to all Florida Indians (Fishburne 1982c). Burial mounds and shell middens, some containing bones and artifacts, have been found on Way Key and West Key. Unfortunately, most of the recovery has been done by amateurs; consequently, attrition, damage, and misinformation have been common.

The exact site of the first European settlement is undetermined. Fortifications were erected and shipbuilding occurred near the present town site during the First Spanish Period (1513-1763). Spanish pirates sailed the area and the notorious Gasparilla allegedly buried treasure ten miles up the coast near the mouth of the Suwannee (WPA guide to Florida 1984, p. 384). Little is known of the area during British Rule, 1763-1783; however, in 1773 the Dutch engineer Bernard Romans, employed by the British as a surveyor, mapped the Florida coast. His book gave Florida wide exposure to the English speaking world (Romans 1775). During the Second Spanish Period, 1784-1821, Cedar Key served as the center for trading activity between local Indians and British agents, as trinkets and guns were exchanged for Indian support against the Spanish. Outlaws exploited the area until Florida (East and West) was ceded to the United States in 1821.

By 1836, the potential of the islands as a military base against the Indians was well recognized. General Zachary Taylor envisioned a major role for the area as one of the many defensive centers established during the Second Seminole War, 1835-1842. Consequently, in 1840 he asked the Secretary of War to have Cedar Key reserved for military purposes (Carter 1962, pp. 34-55). Sea Horse Key, three miles to the southwest, was used as a confinement camp for Indian prisoners, and in 1854 became the site for a lighthouse, later used as a Federal prison in the War between the States. Today Sea Horse Key is uninhabited, accessible only by private boat, and the lighthouse lies abandoned. The Key, a mile long and a mile wide, rises forty-seven feet above sea level and is covered with live and blackjack oaks and mangrove thicket.

Atsena Otie Key, a half-mile south of Way Key (Fig. 2) served during the Second Seminole War as a site for an Army Headquarters, a supply depot, and, because of its salubrious malaria-free climate, a general hospital--all of which were destroyed by hurricane winds and tides in 1842, as twenty-seven foot waters inundated the island (Sprague 1848 [1964, p. 497]). The area was abandoned until Judge Augustus Steele, called by some the "Father of Cedar Key," received permission from the United States government to purchase the remains of the Army structures and facilities for \$227, thereby establishing the first civilian settlement later known as Cedar Key (Fishburne 1982d, p. 4). Initially a summer resort, the community helped to advance the Florida tourist tradition. Judge Steele brought further recognition to Atsena Otie when he was appointed U.S. Collector of Customs for the Ports of Tampa and Cedar Key in 1844, and Postmaster for the Cedar Keys in 1845, establishing both offices on the island (Fishburne 1982d, p. 7). Steele worked closely with his friend and colleague David Levy Yulee, elected Florida's first Senator when statehood was achieved in 1845. The two men, with unswerving dedication, orchestrated the construction of a cross-peninsula railroad to serve the Cedar Keys.

The Yulee railroad, originally incorporated as The Florida Railroad and changed later to The Atlantic, Gulf and West Indies Transit Company, provided a

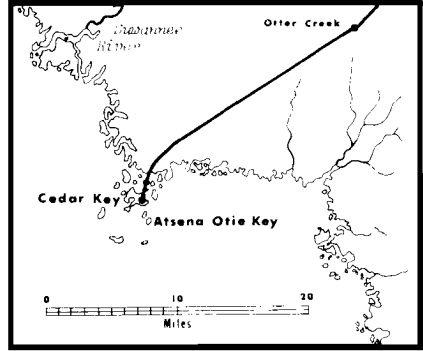


Fig. 2 Cedar Key and Environs¹



Fig. 3 The Florida Railroad

nandina Beach on the east to Cedar Key on the west was the most important (Cedar Key State Museum). Yulee lobbied vigorously before the Florida legislature, arguing that Cedar Key was the logical selection for the Gulf Coast terminus. In comparison with the competing possibilities, Cedar Key had a better harbor, the shortest rail connection between coasts, less expensive shipping costs to New Orleans, and proximity to the 5,100-acre sugar plantation on Tiger Island on the Homosassa River (which, incidentally, Yulee owned) (Fishburne 1982e, p. 3).

As the canal craze in the United States subsided, geography and politics combined to enhance the selection of Cedar Key as the rail-port hub. In anticipation of the railroad's arrival, P. W. O. Koerner, a civil engineer, platted the town of Cedar Key in 1859 for the Florida Tour Improvement Company (Cedar Key Historical Society Museum). The new community, located on the south side of Way Key, faced Judge Steele's growing resort and port settlement, a half mile distant on Atsena Otie. Unfortunately, completion of the railroad coincided with the beginning of the War between the States, which proved a major setback for the area. Florida seceded from the Union in June 1861. Shortly thereafter, rail service was suspended as both Fernandina and Cedar Key were seized by federal forces. Yulee himself was captured, though later pardoned by

U. S. Grant. Wartime population of the area was approximately 100 people, most of whom lived on Atsena Otie and Way Keys (Fishburne 1982e, p. 3). The area was raided by Union Naval forces, buildings were burned, ships were sunk, and a Federal Military Post was established. With the restoration of rail service to Way Key in 1868, Atsena Otie, lacking a link to the mainland, was soon eclipsed by the newer community of Cedar Key; the political, economic, and social center had shifted.

Prosperity blessed the area in the post Civil War era. A timber boom, which had begun in 1855, resulted from Eberhard Faber acquiring land to supply cedar for his pencil factories. The company produced more than 500 kinds of pencils out of graphite from Siberia and cedar acquired locally (Cedar Key State Museum). The famed cedar for which the area was named became the major resource of the area. The Eagle Pencil Company and F. A. Wolfe & Co. set up operations, and the industry reached peak prosperity from 1885 to 1888 (Cedar Key State Museum). A modest shipbuilding operation also developed. Some twenty-eight registered vessels were constructed between 1870 and 1895 (Cedar Keys Museum). In addition, many small boats built for the Greek sponge divers at Tarpon Springs had most of their repair work and fittings done at Cedar Key. A good supply of fish, oysters, and turtles provided the base for additional water-oriented activity (Fillman-Richards and Richards 1978). Mullet, pompano, redfish, and sea trout were exploited commercially. Cedar Key's role as a producer of fish products was enhanced by the cross-peninsula railroad which minimized shipment time of seafood to eastern markets, thereby reducing spoilage. Many of the local green turtles were shipped north and were sold in the Fulton Fish Market in New York City. In 1882 alone, this cargo approximated \$10,000, a sizable figure for the times. In addition, fish were shipped from Clearwater fisheries to Cedar Key for reshipment to Fernandina and other Atlantic ports. Cedar Key had a large sponge field only ten miles away, and sponges also were marketed commercially in northern cities. Cotton and other products from Gulf ports were brought to Cedar Key for transshipment. All mail bound for Havana came to Cedar Key, as boats and trains converged on this rapidly-growing center (Cedar Key State Museum).

The "Town of Cedar Key" assumed the status of the "City of Cedar Key" as the corporation limits expanded in 1881 and again in 1884 (Fishburne 1982f, p. 32). The population swelled from approximately 100 two decades earlier to nearly 3,000 by 1885. Several hotels, businesses, and homes appeared, along with street improvements, a fire department, and street lights. One of the older landmarks, the 135-year-old Island Hotel on Second Street, is undergoing restoration today and is a candidate for placement on the National Register of Historic Places (Stetzel 1984).

Cedar Key enjoyed the trade and prosperity that earlier had made it one of the most important towns in Florida. It competed favorably with the ports of Jacksonville, Fernandina, Pensacola, and Key West. Its geographic advantages were many--good harbor, favorable climate, an abundance of natural resources such as fish, turtles, oysters, sponges and cedar, and, of course, the all-important trans-peninsula railroad.²

The Decline

The decline came as these pillars of viability collapsed. The completion of Henry Plant's railroad from the northern part of the state to Tampa in 1884 proved a major check on Cedar Key's prosperity and a critical factor contributing to decline (Varney 1963, p. 5; Varney 1985). Within a decade the timber resources were largely exhausted, primarily the result of over-cutting and lack of an adequate conservation policy for reforestation. Natural ecological changes and over-exploitation depleted the oyster and sponge beds. As industries failed, traffic on the railroad declined substantially. The larger port of Tampa with its associated railroad emerged as the leading commercial center of Florida's Gulf coast.

The coup de grace proved to be the devastating hurricane of 1896 in which more than 100 died and hundreds were left homeless. More than 75 percent of the timber was blown down, the community on Atsena Otie was completely leveled, and hotels and structures burned and collapsed on Cedar Key. Moreover, three-and-a-half miles of railroad track and trestles were washed away, and the local industries were destroyed (Fishburne 1982b, pp. 26-30). Cedar Key lay in shambles.

And the Revival?

Failing in the 20th century to recapture her former economic base, Cedar Key has remained fairly stable in size with a population today of around 700, a figure that approximates that of 1900. "Old Cedar Key" on Atsena Otie was abandoned after the hurricane and is today an unpopulated, snake-infested, overgrown island accessible only by private or charter boat. Remnants of a few former structures still stand, including a water tower and cemetery.

The contemporary town of Cedar Key is a noted weekend retreat, famous for sport and commercial fishing, good seafood, oysters, and sponges. Recent construction of waterfront condominiums attests to the fact that Cedar Key is in the process of discovery. The local pier and adjacent Marine Bay road loop, site of the old railroad trestle, serve as a focus for the community's waterfront. Stilt structures house four excellent seafood restaurants, several offices and shops, and some new apartments. Second Street is the chief commercial center and resembles a ghost town or movie set with numerous unpainted two-story 19th century frame structures.

Cedar Key has two annual events that attract many Floridians and out-of-state tourists. The Cedar Key Seafood Festival is held during the third weekend in October, and the Cedar Key Art Festival is scheduled for the third weekend of April. The latter, much to the ire of local residents, attracted some 35,000 people in 1978 and overwhelmed the community (Gainesville Sun 1978, p. B-3). Subsequent art festivals have been restricted in size to avoid such successes and excesses. Today Cedar Key, in its relative geographic isolation, is small, tranquil, and friendly. The past is well documented and on display in two museums, the Cedar Key Historical Society Museum and the Cedar Key State Museum. The presence of these museums is appropriate; the geography and history of Cedar Key had thrust the community into prominence in the 19th century and now help to ease her progress in the 20th century.

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1. Source: After Fillman-Richards and Richards 1978, Fig. 1.
2. The trans-peninsula railroad was the vision of David Levy Yulee for transport to by-pass the long trip around the Florida peninsula. For some his dream lives today in the form of the now partially completed and abandoned, but still highly controversial Florida Cross Barge Canal.

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