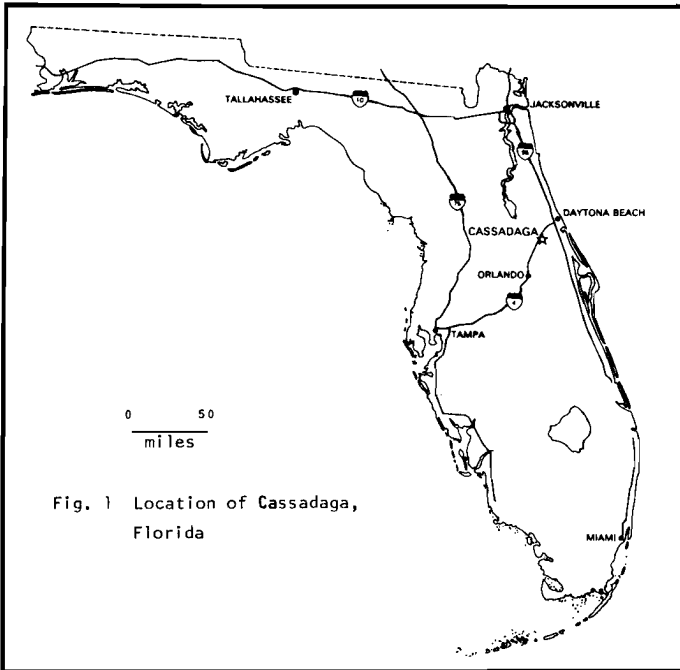


CASSADAGA

JUST A *MEDIUM* PLACE

Harry J. Schaleman, Jr.

Relatively unaffected by the congested highways of east central Florida that serve such popular attractions as Disney World, EPCOT, the Daytona 500, and Kennedy Space Center, Cassadaga is a small, secluded, quiet community that is one of the state's more interesting rural settlements. Cassadaga is the largest community of Spiritualists per capita in the South, and one of the oldest in the country, with a history dating back to the late nineteenth century (Karcher and Hutchinson, 1980, p. vii). Reflecting this, the community differs in external physical appearance as well as internal demographic makeup from other Florida towns of comparable size.



Modern Spiritualism in the U.S.A. is usually attributed to the Fox sisters of Hydesville, New York, who in 1848 stunned the world with a much publicized communication with the dead (Harrold, 1979, p. 15). By the 1870's, the popularity of Spiritualism had attracted an estimated one and a half million adherents (Magida, 1983, p. 83). Scattered throughout the country are a

few other Spiritualist communities, the oldest and most notable being the Lily Dale Assembly of Cassadaga in New York state, and Camp Chesterfield in Indiana (Harrold, 1979, preface).

Today, automobile bumper stickers and tee-shirts carry the slogan "Cassadaga--just a medium place," a play on words, since Cassadaga is a place for "mediums" in the Spiritualist definition of the word. A hundred or more members of the community, including healers, mediums, and psychics, practice and/or profess their beliefs in Spiritualism (Mathers, 1982, p. 1-B). The population of the unincorporated village fluctuates from about three to five hundred, mostly middle-age to elderly residents, reflecting the seasonal impact of visitors and tourists (Hardebeck, 1982, p. 73). From mid December through March Cassadaga becomes a lively mecca for the assemblage of Spiritualist visitors from all over the U.S.A. and abroad.

Cassadaga is in many ways the story of one man, George P. Colby -- bachelor, teacher, lecturer, foster parent, Spiritualist -- who arrived on this site in 1875. According to legend, Colby was spiritually inspired "to found a religious retreat in the wilderness" (Southerland, 1972, p. 28). He was born in Pike, New York, in 1848. His talent as a medium surfaced as he entered his teenage years, and his reputation as a popular speaker and Spiritualist spread. He traveled extensively in the East and Midwest and became a favorite in upstate New York at the Cassadaga Lakes Free Association (today named the Lily Dale Assembly). Experiencing frequent ill health, Colby was advised to seek a more favorable climate. According to legend, Colby was in Iowa conducting a seance when "Seneca," an Indian spirit guide with whom he had previously been in contact, directed him to rendezvous in Eau Claire, Wisconsin, with the T. G. Gidding family. There, both were instructed by "Seneca" to travel to Florida to establish a Spiritualist outpost. In 1875, Colby, Gidding, and others left from the Twin Cities area of Minnesota and traveled via train south through Chicago, Louisville, and Montgomery, then down the Chattahoochee by boat, and finally once more by train from Tallahassee to Jacksonville. There, following a brief layover, Colby and a few followers boarded the steamboat, *The Volusia*, sailed south to Blue Springs near Orange City, Florida, and camped out on the river bank unaware of their next move. During the night, "Seneca" once more appeared to Colby and revealed a vision in which a small community of Spiritualists that would someday serve as a great learning center for the faithful would be established in Central Florida. Sharing these revelations with his followers, Colby and associates traveled the next day via mule wagon to the site that today is Cassadaga. Here "Seneca" and Colby were satisfied that this was the place (Karcher and Hutchinson, 1980, pp. 67-8). In deference to the locale of his earlier Spiritualist success, and also because of close geographic similarity, the area was named Cassadaga by Colby, as it reminded him of the pine bluffs and a chain of several small lakes in the Cassadaga Hills area of New York. (Wallace, 1972, p. 3).

Colby built a home adjacent to a lake later named in his honor and there he lived out his life, raising fifteen homeless children, working in the lumber business, and actively pursuing his interests in Spiritualism. Today his home, vacated for years, stands deteriorating amid a dense thicket of trees and undergrowth, adding a further gothic reference to the already haunting reputation of the community.

Colby's dream of a Spiritualist center materialized in 1894 when he encouraged a group of prominent northern Spiritualists to settle on his property, thereby founding the Southern Cassadaga Spiritualist Camp Meeting Association (Harrold, 1979, pp. 21-22). Only the year before, Spiritualism had been accepted as a bona fide religion in the U.S.A. by Congress (Karcher and Hutchinson, 1980, p. 69).

In 1895 he deeded a tract of thirty-five acres to the Association, thereby establishing the campsite of today (Southern Cassadaga Spiritualist Camp Meeting Association, 1983-84, p. 1). Records indicate that Colby died -- or in Spiritualist terms, "passed over to the other side" -- in 1933 in nearby Deland, and was subsequently buried in a small cemetery between the communities of Lake Helen and Cassadaga.

Located between Orlando and Daytona Beach, Cassadaga lies on County Road 4139 in western Volusia County. Like the community itself, the physical setting is an anomaly for the region. Low hills shaded by thick covers of tall pine, camphor, and oaks draped with Spanish moss, as well as numerous cabbage palms, create a dark, cool mystique that is in striking contrast to the bright, sunny flatness so much a part of the Florida stereotype. The land slopes eastward down toward small lakes and ponds, named appropriately Spirit Pond, Lake Colby, and Giddings Lake.

Cassadaga today is two villages separated physically and spiritually by the main street, the narrow, two-lane County Road 4139. The non-Spiritualist part of the community is north of the highway, while across the street is the Spiritualist campsite. The character of the community is reflected by its residents who live in relative harmony, most of whom are from Florida and neighboring states; others are from the U. S. East and Midwest. The non-Spiritualist residents are mostly Baptist and Methodist living in some seventy houses that resemble other old, comfortable Florida rural homes. Like its Spiritualist counterpart, the area is quiet, hilly, and wooded. With the exception of a few new houses, the area and structures remain relatively unchanged, reflecting construction of the 1920's and 30's. A number of the residents are employed in the nearby village of Lake Helen at the Nautilus plant, while others work at a variety of jobs reflective of any small town.

Across the street is the Spiritualist campsite, with entry between two white, weathered concrete pillars that formerly supported iron gates, affording the residents privacy. Now the gates are gone, and psychics, healers, and mediums live inside on property owned by the Southern Cassadaga Spiritualist Camp Meeting Association. Residents must be stockholders in the Association and lease property, usually for a ninety-nine year period. To qualify for residence, one must achieve "certification" in the Spiritualist field through standards set up by the Association. Most residents belong to Colby Memorial Temple, the only church on the campsite. Many elderly residents are retired. Others advertise their expertise via small signs on the fronts of their cottages and live on income from "readings" to believers, doubters, and the curious who stop by.

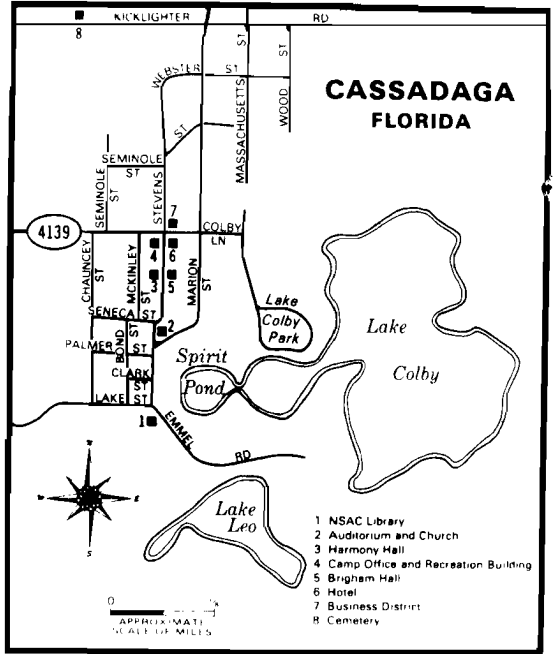


Fig. 2 Cassadaga Street Plan

The campsite is square in shape and is platted in a compact fashion on seven streets. Houses number about sixty and many resemble small, wooden-shingled, New England beach-style cottages, with steeply inclined tin roofs atypical of Florida construction. Because of the prevalence of mosquitoes from the nearby lakes, screened-in porches are common. Narrow, oak-lined streets wind down from the camp entrance to the church and shore of Spirit Pond. Moss-covered trees, colorful flower beds, and gravel walks add charm. At the far end of the campsite on a knoll overlooking Spirit Pond is a large, white, two-story house that serves as the library for the National Spiritualist Association of Churches. The collection specializes in publications on Spiritualism and related subjects and is available to residents and students of the faith.

The business area of Cassadaga is limited, dominated by the Cassadaga Hotel. This forty-two room, two-story, pseudo-Mediterranean structure of cinder blocks was built in 1927, replacing an earlier wooden hotel which was destroyed by fire. The present hostelry is cream-colored stucco with a long porch and large wicker rockers. Several other large structures cluster near the hotel and entrance area, just inside the campsite: namely, the Andrew Jackson Davis Educational Building, Harmony Hall, and Brigham Hall -- all of which are of early 1920 vintage. The former, named after a 19th century mystical philosopher and writer, is a sizeable one-story white frame structure that serves as a meeting hall and learning center. The latter two buildings, both white, wooden, two-story residential structures fronted with screened-in porches, were built by the Association as early boarding houses. Today, more than sixty years later, both still serve as seasonal and yearly residences for Spiritualists. On the north, non-Spiritualist side of the street, are several small businesses: the grocery, beauty salon, and post office. The tavern, recently destroyed by fire of mysterious origin, had long served as an area for social exchange for both Spiritualist and non-Spiritualist residents. Its mere presence was considered a nuisance to some of the more conservative members of the community, and an arson investigation is currently in progress.

Visitors arrive by thousands each year seeking guidance, Spiritualist inspiration, warm weather, solitude, and community. In the 1930's, Cassadaga was receiving international notice, as famous mediums "wintered" and held highly-publicized seances here. This "golden age" for Cassadaga led to some fraudulent practices, as charlatans on occasion produced and even photographed "spirits from beyond" (Saint Petersburg Times, 1981, p. 8). Exposure of such practices resulted in adverse publicity and brought irreparable harm to the reputation of the community and its residents. Reaction was swift, as certification standards were strengthened within the camp and a sincere, concerted effort was made to restore legitimacy and confidence to community and profession.

Today, Cassadaga continues to serve residents and followers by hosting national, regional, and local Spiritualist conferences, and providing a comfortable settlement for those wishing to retire in Florida in relative seclusion with neighbors of similar beliefs and interests. It is very much a passive reclusive community which attempts to avoid publicity and is the antithesis of many other religious groups that aggressively and sometimes fanatically express their beliefs with missionary zeal. Cassadaga prefers to linger in the shadows.

Skeptics and non-believers mock the community as the "town of the living dead" or the "town that talks to the dear departed," but healthy curiosity remains. It is estimated that as many as 50,000 visitors arrive annually from all parts of the country to "communicate with the dead" or to receive "readings" based on a patron's "aura" or spirit energy (Yothers, 1972, p. B-2). It may be "Spooktown" to some, but it is home, a viable community, and a religious haven for others.

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