

A Brief History of Boca Grande's Development & Architectural Influences

Historic Preservation

Location

The Boca Grande Historic District is situated in the center of Gasparilla Island, a seven mile long barrier island in Charlotte Harbor. Two-thirds of the island lies in Lee County; the northern one-third lies in Charlotte County. Throughout the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century there were three separate and distinct villages on Gasparilla Island. On the north was the village of Boca Grande, home of the Gasparilla Inn and haven for the wealthy winter residents. In the south was the Port Boca Grande which is one of Florida's deepest natural passes.

History

The story of Boca Grande is closely related to phosphate rock. In the 1880s phosphate rock was discovered on the banks of the Peace River, north of Arcadia. Phosphate was barged down the Peace River to Port Boca Grande and loaded onto four or five masted schooners. In 1890 a lighthouse was erected on the southern tip of Gasparilla Island to aid this industry.

By 1900 the American Agricultural Chemical Company (AAC), which dominated the phosphate industry of Central Florida, determined that a railroad would be more efficient in transporting phosphate to the port rather than the ricker barges. The AAC determined that the proposed terminus of the railroad should be located about a quarter mile north of the lighthouse on the harbor side of Gasparilla Island. The Charlotte Harbor and Northern (CHN) railroad was completed in 1907. The port facilities have since been removed and redeveloped with a residential subdivision.

Prior to the discovery of phosphate, Gasparilla Island was a government reserve. In 1878 the central section of Gasparilla Island was released from reserved status. The homestead lands conveyed from the federal government to various individuals eventually were all acquired by either John Wall, an attorney in Tampa, or by Albert Gilchrist, a Punta Gorda politician (who became governor of Florida in 1909). In January of 1897, Gilchrist filed a plat consisting of six blocks along the Gulf front in the south central portion of Gasparilla Island, where the island is widest and best suited for residential development. In 1907, Wall and Gilchrist teamed up with officers of the AAC (among them Peter Bradley) and formed the Boca Grande Land Company as part of the AAC corporate entity.

In 1909 the officers of the Boca Grande Land Company decided to build a resort hotel on Gasparilla Island. This was to be the Gasparilla Inn. By that time the Charlotte Harbor area, specifically the area south of Gasparilla Island, was known for unexcelled tarpon fishing and was famous among sportsmen. By 1912 the officers of the company decided to change the Gasparilla Inn from a small hotel housing visiting directors and company officers to a world class hotel. The renowned architect Francis J. Kennard of Tampa, Florida designed the enlargement. The hotel was such a success that in 1915 Kennard was called again to draw plans to double the size of the Gasparilla Inn. Hotel clients came year after year; for many of them staying at the Gasparilla Inn became life-long habit.

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In 1914 a casino was built near the Gasparilla Inn, and a boat house on the bayou. Gilchrist Avenue was lined with coconut palms and hibiscus as was Palm Avenue south of the Inn. The block between Gilchrist Avenue and Park Avenue on Second Street was lined with banyan trees. (Today known as Banyan Street)

The Boca Grande School was built in 1911. A second story was added to the building in 1914 so that the school could qualify to be a junior high. It was closed in 1929 when the new Boca Grande School was built. The K-12 school was closed in 1964 because of declining enrollment. Today it serves as Boca Grande's Community Center and central focus for the island's recreation programs.

Game fishing and tourism are responsible for most of the development during the 1920s. By 1925 more and more Florida east coast residents were becoming disenchanted with the Florida boom and wanted to give up their east coast homes for more quiet, more quaint atmospheres. Since Boca Grande had remained unspoiled and exclusive, it attracted many tourists from the northeast and, with the added attraction of unparalleled tarpon fishing, Boca Grande became a very desirable location.

As with other communities across the state, development tapered off after the Florida Land Boom. But because of the many attractions that Boca Grande and the surrounding area still offers, Boca Grande continues to grow. Fortunately, due to the sensitivity of the island's residents, much of the early architectural heritage still remains today.

Architectural Influences

The architecture of Boca Grande was influenced by a number of physical and social issues. The early buildings are a compilation of these many influences. Being remote from the mainland, early buildings relied on simple designs to make the subtropical environment habitable. Wide eaves, covered porches at the main entrances and louvered shutters were common characteristics. The early buildings were commonly raised above the ground to allow for circulation of breezes and the passage of water under the house during times of high tides or storms. Ceilings were typically high and open, allowing for hot air to escape during the day. Another climatic factor was the lack of fresh water. This required the use of gutters, which funneled the rain water into cisterns for future use.

The Gasparilla Inn and other hotels accommodated the tourists and winter residents who enjoyed fishing and participating in the social life of Boca Grande. Many of these visitors remained and built waterfront estates along the Gulf of Mexico, introducing a wider variety of decorative architectural styles, but mostly building in the Mediterranean Revival style.

Boca Grande also had a demand for worker housing. As a result, bungalow style houses were concentrated to the south of the commercial district; many of these houses were built by the railroad to house the railroad workers. This style of architecture borrowed from the early vernacular housing, such as the raised floors, covered porches and high ceilings. One of the reasons it was such a popular style was because it was available through mail order plans and was simple and inexpensive to build. On some of the structures it is common to see more decoration than would be observed on vernacular homes, such as trim elements on the gable ends, dentils and wood window surrounds.

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