

Historical Amelia Island

To many travelers, Amelia Island is a newfound paradise. But centuries of people have been drawn to its tranquil shores and exquisite natural beauty.

According to local folklore and historical evidence, Timucuan Indians first inhabited Amelia Island as early as 2000 BC. The Timucuan people were known for elaborate body tattoos in yellow, black, blue and red.

The island was originally named "Isle de Mai" (Island of May) by Jean Ribault, a Huguenot leader who landed on Amelia Island in 1562. It is said that when Ribault and his troops arrived, they were welcomed by the Timcuans and given baskets of berries. Even though the Spanish had claimed the area in 1513, these French colonists showed interest in the island to claim land for France and to seek refuge from the religious and political persecution given to Huguenots. Though Ribault and his company did not settle on Amelia Island, other Huguenots landed in 1564. This second colony constructed Fort Caroline in Northern Jacksonville near the mouth of the St. John's River. In 1565, Spanish troops came to the area, killed the French settlers and regained the territory, which they had claimed as their own years before.

The arrival of these Spanish troops led to the first Spanish reign from 1565 to 1763. A mission called Santa Maria was built on the northern end of Amelia Island in what is now known as Old Town. The mission was created to convert Indians to Christianity. At that time, the original name "Isle de Mai" was changed to "Isle de Santa Maria".

In the years to follow, the Timucuans of Amelia Island gained contact with the Europeans, and British settlements in the North soon took a keen interest in the naturally deep ports and the strategic trade route locations on the island. Once again the name of the island was changed, this time to "Amelia" in honour of the Princess Amelia, daughter of King George II. James Oglethorpe, Governor of Georgia, put the name change in place in 1735. The British changed the name of the island to "Amelia", but the land did not fall into British hands until the Spanish Florida was traded for British Cuba in 1763 in an agreement under the Treaty of Paris. During British rule, Amelia Island was known as Egmont.

In 1783, the Second Treaty of Paris ended the Revolutionary War, and Florida was returned to Spain. In 1811 a surveyor named George J. F. Clarke plotted the town of Fernandina, named in honor of King Ferdinand VII of Spain. The Patriots of Amelia Island, an independent group of American civilians backed by the United States government, seized control of the island, drove out the Spanish, and raised the American flag. The following day, Amelia Island was ceded to the United States.

The Golden Age

1870 to 1910 was considered the Golden Age of Amelia Island. During this era, several wealthy Americans made Fernandina their homes. Elegant Victorian style houses were built in what became known as the Silk Stocking District. Ulysses Grant visited the Egmont Hotel, one of the grandest hotels of its time. The turn-of-the-century boom of Amelia Island came about with the advent of the shipping industry, and increasing numbers of New Yorkers who came traveled by steamboat to enjoy the warm climate and elegant hotels in Amelia.

In recent years, Amelia Island has grown and prospered as a popular tourist destination. Many accommodation choices are available to suit every sort of traveler, and the Amelia Island Plantation is considered to be one of the world's perfect island destinations. Modern tourists are learning what centuries had already known: Amelia Island is a true treasure.