Thonotosassa
Lake Thonotosassa
Baker Creek
Campbell Branch
Flint Creek

6 pgs
**Thonotosassa (Lake Thonotosassa)**

Lake Thonotosassa is situated in the north central section of the county, approximately 14 miles northeast of Tampa. Thonotosassa is a derivative of the Seminole-Creek words thlonoto and sasse, meaning “flint is there.” Between 1812 and 1820, a Seminole-Creek village had been established southeast of the lake. It was this group who named the lake and utilized the area’s flint resources for tools. Almost immediately after the erection of Fort Brooke, the military constructed a road between the fort and Ocala’s Fort King, passing along the northwestern end of Lake Thonotosassa. This road, ten years later, became the site of the official beginning of the Second Seminole War with the attack and defeat of Major Francis L. Dade near present-day Bushnell. According to local legend, Major Dade and his troops stopped approximately three miles southwest of the lake to rest on the first day of their fateful march. Some of the men had sweet oranges from Cuba which they ate and disposed of the seeds. These men are credited with having inadvertently grown the first citrus trees in the Thonotosassa region.

A Native American village is known to have existed near the lake, as late as 1843, led by Billy Bowlegs, a prominent Seminole Chief. The presence of an active Seminole village in the region acted as a buffer against White homesteaders from moving to Lake Thonotosassa. With the cessation of the Second Seminole War in 1842, Whites began to view the lake area favorably. The first such settler was William Goodman Miley, a native of Scotland, along with his wife and five children who homesteaded 40 acres on the southern lakeshore in 1846. They cleared a patch of land for farming and transplanted several of Major Dade’s orange trees to his property. Miley built a log cabin for his family, a common housing type for Thonotosassa homesteaders until the 1880s.

Early settlers, usually young folks, built their houses of readily available material, in this case pine logs. Called a “double-pen house,” they had two good sized rooms, fifteen to twenty feet square, with a covered open passageway between, a cool place even in hot weather. In Florida there is always a breeze in the shade. The roof was made of hand riven shingles, and the spaces between the logs covered by hand riven battens, both usually of cypress, a softer wood and easier to split smoothly than pine. Back of this, separate, or connected by a passageway that was often covered, was a smaller structure for cooking and eating. As the family grew shed rooms were added. An old house made one think of a mother hen with here wings spread out to shelter her brood.

These houses were spacious and comfortable. The thick walls kept out the heat in summer. The stick and clay chimney, with clay apron, kept the room warm in winter. Windows were wood shutters, with leather straps in lieu of hinges a the top, held open by a stick. The first glass windows were held up by a stick. The next fastener I recall was a little knob with a spring through the sash into the casing. Doors too were made of boards nailed together, with leather hinges. They were fastened by a piece of board lifted by a rawhide string run often outside a little hole. Hen the expression of hospitality, “The latchstring is out.”

The Mileys were soon joined by others including George W. Adams who moved from
Connecticut to Florida in 1870. He settled in Thonotosassa in 1872 and filed for homestead 163 acres on the north side of the lake on August 13, 1883. An executive of the Singer Swing Machine Company, Adams had the money to construct a house Georgian Revival detailing. As with others who moved to the region, Adams grew citrus and established a packing plant on his property. Through the years the house has undergone changes, but the structure still exists today.iv

The Mileys and the Adams were the first of a trickle of settlers that turned into a torrent during the 1880s. W.P. Hazen, a wealthy Ohio native, created this flood of newcomers after he moved to Thonotosassa in 1881. Upon purchasing 2000 acres along the lakeshore, Hazen transplanted 1700 orange trees onto what would become a 40 acre grove. He also erected a windmill and a sawmill. The Cooper family followed Mr. Hazen from Ohio to help build his home. Once the house was finished, Hazen sold the sawmill to the Coopers. Between 1882 and 1900, the family constructed 32 structures around Lake Thonotosassa, including Hazen’s hotel, three citrus packing plants, over two dozen houses, and a store.v

Hazen’s promotional success was reflected in The Sunland Tribune, a Tampa newspaper, which began lavishing praise upon the area in the early 1880s. People were drawn to Thonotosassa because of the beauty of the lake and the success of citrus.vi While located over 1000 miles south of Walden Pond, Henry David Thoreau would have felt at home on Lake Thonotosassa as revealed in this 1885 description:

Thonotosassa Lake, which for beauty and grandeur has not a rival sheet of water this side of Niagara Falls. At the time of writing it is at its lowest, but now measures two miles in length and one in width. Upon the beach of this small inland sea are situated beautiful cottages, encircled with the native oak and the evergreen orange. It teems with the most delicious quality of trout and other fish, and it is quite notorious that this lake affords one of the best fresh-water fisheries in South Florida. ‘It is the pride of the citizens of the community,...who feast upon the beauty of its waves and breathe the purity and vigor of its breezes.’vii

With the influx of people, Thonotosassa coalesced into a community. A.C. Moore established Thonotosassa’s first general store in 1883. This same year Miss Ida Davis taught in a one-room log schoolhouse. Not satisfied with the building, area residents raised money and donated land to build a public school in 1884. Two years later a post office was established in Edward Weed’s general store. Three days a week Charles and Tom Clendenning went to Seffner to pick up the mail from the South Florida Railroad and delivered to Weed’s general store. Many of the earliest settlers around the lake were Southerners. This changed, however, when Hazen enticed mostly Northerners from Ohio and New York to purchase property around the lake. Reflective of Florida today, as early as the 1890s, people would reside in Thonotosassa during the winter months and return north during the summer. By 1893, 150 people called Thonotosassa home.viii

Prior to the establishment of the railroad, a person would travel many hours by covered wagon the 15 miles between Tampa and Thonotosassa. Locals longed for a railroad to connect the community to Tampa. As early as 1882 the Florida Tropical Railroad proposed to build tracks south to Shiloh, then turn west, passing through Thonotosassa on its way to Tampa. Thonotosassa residents never heard the whistle of the Florida Tropical Railroad. When Henry
Plant constructed the South Florida Railroad through Seffner in 1883, Thonotosassa residents could travel six miles to Seffner to board the train to Tampa. This left much to be desired, however. Eleven years later, Hazen enticed Plant to construct a line to the lake community by donating the land for a depot. In 1893, the Tampa and Thonotosassa Railroad was born. Farmers could get their citrus crop to market, and the mail arrived on a regular schedule. As produce flowed to Tampa, urbanites visited the beautiful lake during the weekends for picnics and boating excursions. The train also had a negative effect upon the community. Thonotosassa stagnated as people began relocating to Tampa.

Two years after the arrival of the train, Florida’s citrus industry suffered one of its most devastating setbacks ever. On December 27, 1894, Tampa’s temperature plummeted to 14°. Oranges were frozen on the tree, but Thonotosassa’s trees survived. Lulled into a sense of security by rising temperatures, farmers replanted crops and prayed for new buds on their orange trees. Beginning on February 7 and through the 9th, the temperatures again dropped below freezing, destroying not just the new growth but the trees themselves. These freezes wiped out much of north Florida’s citrus industry and set Thonotosassa’s back several years. While stunting the growth of the citrus industry, the freeze caused farmers to diversify. Farmers turned to truck growing while waiting the five or more years for new citrus trees to mature.

The citrus industry revived and so did Thonotosassa. The first three decades of the new century were the apex of Thonotosassa’s growth and prosperity. By 1908 citrus and sawmills were the main sources of employment for area residents. Hazen’s hotel was still operated by Mrs. E.E. Hazen, in 1911. The community’s 250 residents could purchase most of their supplies at A.W. Rigby’s general store. Sadly, Thonotosassa’s hotel closed its doors forever in 1912. Possibly because of this economic loss, 17 charter members established the Thonotosassa’s Board of Trade in 1913. Five years after the formation of the board, Thonotosassa’s citrus industry flourished with four packing houses. Oranges were the primary crop, but grapefruit and tangerines were also grown. Two general stores, two churches, an ice manufacturer, a saw mill, and a new hotel operated in the community. Thonotosassa reveled in the roaring twenties and Florida’s land boom, beginning with the platting of Thonotosassa Lake Side Development in 1924. By 1925, the community’s population reached 300. Thonotosassa had become Hillsborough County’s premier fruit-growing region. The local populace now supported four packing houses, three churches, three general stores, a hotel, and an ice manufacturer.

As Thonotosassa developed the lake suffered. With the cutting down of many of the oak trees and the draining of surrounding land, sediment runoff polluted the lake’s water and destroyed the once sugar white beaches. Coupled with the bust of the land boom and the Great Depression, Thonotosassa languished. Only two packing houses operated in Thonotosassa in 1935. During World War II, many of the area’s young men left Thonotosassa to enlist or to work in war industries. With the dwindling population, the Chamber of Commerce and the Methodist Church suspended operations. By 1978, even the rails for the railroad were pulled up by the Seaboard Coastline.

Citrus still dominated Lake Thonotosassa region during the early 1980s, but farmers could see suburban developments on the horizon. Between 1986 and 1995, the number of homes Thonotosassa’s post office delivered mail to grew from 3000 to 25,000. In 1990, 19,342 people
lived in the greater Thonotosassa area, which included the homes between the lake and Pasco County. This boom was fueled by Tampa professionals who favored the tranquility of rural Hillsborough County and did not mind the 20 minute drive from the lake to downtown Tampa. Of this larger population, approximately 6000 to 7000 people lived in Thonotosassa in 1995.xiii


vii. Hillsborough County Real Estate Agency, Descriptive Pamphlet of Hillsborough County, 34.


xii. Florida State Chamber of Commerce and Florida Emergency Relief Administration, comp., Industrial Directory of Florida, 1925-36, 164; HTHCPB, The Cultural Resources of the Unincorporated Portions of Hillsborough County, 35; “Remember When the lake was Crystal Clear...” Horse & Pony February 15, 1969, 2; Schlaughenhoupt, “Some Still Recall Thonotosassa’s Rails,” 5E.