Pensacola Maritime Heritage Trail

Presented to the Community Maritime Park Associates, Inc.
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Pensacola Maritime Trail

A Native Americans  
B Spanish Exploration  
C Development/Industry of the Port  
D 18th Century Pensacola  
E Spanish and British Forts  
F US Territory  
G Industrial Expansion  
H Hurricanes & Environmental Impacts  
I Fishing Industry  
J Submerged Cultural Resources
Maritime Prehistory

Archaeology has helped us learn a great deal about life in prehistoric Pensacola. Though little archaeological evidence exists from Pensacola’s earliest Paleoindian residents, sites from later periods reveal a strong reliance on the marine landscape. Local salt and fresh waterways provided sources of food and water, routes for transportation, and raw materials for tools.

Beginning in the Late Archaic period, prehistoric people increasingly used local waterways to create trade networks. Later Woodland and Mississippian period groups relied on abundant fish and shellfish to feed growing numbers. These groups often modified marine shells to create spoons, jewelry, cups, axes, and other tools. Woodland and Mississippian people also built large ceremonial mounds along the shoreline, constructed with discarded shells. Much like today, marine resources were an important part of prehistoric life in Pensacola.
Pensacola and its waterways held a special significance for early Spanish explorers. Remnants of conquistador Pánfilo de Narváez's expedition sighted Pensacola Bay as early as 1528. In 1539 and 1540, Francisco de Maldonado waited in the bay to resupply Hernando de Soto's conquistadores, though they never arrived.

By the mid 1500s, Spain hoped to lay claim to the area to protect the route of ships sailing back to Spain. Tristán de Luna y Arellano was charged with establishing a colony on Pensacola Bay, then called Ochuse. In 1559, Luna brought 1500 people, including families, slaves, and Aztec soldiers, to settle the area he renamed Santa María Filipina. A hurricane destroyed the new colony and Luna's ships, causing the settlers to abandon the effort after two years. Spain did not try to settle Pensacola again until 1698 when colonists successfully settled at the present Naval Air Station.
Developing the Port of Pensacola

When the Spanish arrived in Pensacola Bay in 1559 and again in 1698, they praised the area’s natural resources: the deep-water bay provided a safe harbor for large ships, rivers supplied fresh water, large forests offered a reliable source of timber, and local plants and animals meant an abundant source of food. Of the many bays along the Gulf of Mexico, Pensacola Bay held the most promise for establishing a successful settlement.

Though colonists did not initially see Pensacola as a source of commercial wealth, they did consider it to be strategically important. Local geography provided Spanish fortifications with full views of ships entering and leaving Pensacola Bay. When they arrived in 1763, British colonists inherited many of these well-situated Spanish fortifications and buildings. The British also utilized local live oak trees to establish a regional center for shipbuilding and repair.
A History Shaped by Hurricanes

Pensacola’s residents have endured more than 450 years of destructive hurricanes. The first historically recorded hurricane overwhelmed Don Tristán de Luna’s 1559 colonization attempt, destroying most of the eleven ships in his fleet. In 1715, another hurricane drove a subsequent Spanish settlement from Santa Rosa Island in 1752. Storms continued to plague Pensacola under British rule. During a three-month siege against the British in 1779, a hurricane struck just three days before Spain's victory.

Hurricanes also afflicted Pensacola at the turn of the 20th century. These hurricanes in 1906, 1916, and 1928 shattered the city’s waterfront, causing significant damage to ships and local industry. By the 1930s, the familiar system of naming hurricanes was in place and new technology could provide early warnings. Though these warnings help many coastal residents evacuate and save some of their possessions, hurricanes remain a threat. Hurricanes Felix and Opal thrashed Pensacola in the 1990s, followed by the devastating Hurricane Ivan in 2004.
“Gloucester of the Gulf”

Pensacola became a center for Florida commercial fishing by the 1870s. The industry’s primary export was red snapper (Lutjanus campechanus). Pensacola’s fish houses, including E.E. Saunders & Co. on the Palafox Street wharf and the Warren Fish Company on the Baylen Street wharf, caught nearly five million pounds of red snapper each year by 1900. These massive catches eventually led to overfishing offshore, forcing fishermen to roam as far as the coast of Mexico to find fish.

The last all-steel fishing fleet in the United States, Pensacola’s red snapper fishing schooners were often called “smacks” because of the sound of water and fish splashing inside the vessels’ live wells. These fishing smacks were a unique fixture of the city’s waterfront until the decline of the industry in the mid-1900s.
Archaeology in a Maritime Community

Pensacola Bay has served as a valuable resource for populations from prehistoric to modern times. The relationship between these people and their environment is often reflected in archaeological sites submerged beneath the bay’s waters. In addition to the many shipwrecks in Pensacola Bay, other archaeological sites include wharves, fishing piers, and prehistoric settlements.

Archaeological sites contain cultural materials that help to explain historical events and previous ways of life. Many of these resources are threatened by erosion, coastal development, and other harmful activities. If these archaeological sites are damaged or destroyed, they cannot be replaced. The University of West Florida and other local heritage organizations strive to raise awareness and protect these fragile and non-renewable resources, but we need your help! Become a steward for your local history by being an advocate for archaeological site protection and preservation.

Students in the University of West Florida’s Anthropology Department continue to serve as a survey of underwater archaeological sites in Pensacola Bay and nearby waters every year. (Image courtesy of the UWF Anthropology Section.)