Boca Grande: The Town the Railroad Built

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Captain Carey Johnson, retired bar pilot, sadly shakes his head as he ponders the demise of the phosphate shipping operations at Boca Grande, Florida. It bothers him that after seventy years of being one of Florida’s major deep water ports, Boca Grande should be abandoned.

Captain Johnson is part of the family of pioneering seamen who opened the port and saw it develop after phosphate was discovered and mined near Bartow in 1885. A need emerged for better shipping methods than that of floating barges down the Peace River to Punta Gorda and Charlotte Harbor. This, in turn, led to the building of the railroad and the establishment of the quaint and unique town of Boca Grande on Gasparilla Island.

Boca Grande is the deepest natural port between Tampa and Miami with a thirty-two foot controlling depth and holes reported up to ninety feet deep. Favorably located at the western end of Charlotte Harbor, it afforded access from the Gulf for ships of many foreign countries. In 1888, Captain I. W. Johnson and his brother, Will Johnson, sailed from Punta Gorda to Gasparilla Island and became the first pilots for the area. The only other inhabitants at the time were the Gasparilla lighthouse keeper and his family. The few buildings were the lighthouse, a cottage for the quarantine doctor, and a bunkhouse for the pilots.
A decade later, the Alafia Manatee and Gulf Railway Company was incorporated by the Florida Legislature “for the purpose of constructing and operating a railroad for the transportation of passengers, produce, goods, and all other freight, from a point at or near Plant City, Florida . . . to a point on Charlotte Harbor.” In 1906, the Company was absorbed by the Charlotte Harbor and Northern Railway, which proposed to construct a 110-mile road from Plant City to Boca Grande. By then, the American Agriculture and Chemical Company, the parent company of the Charlotte Harbor and Northern Railway, had begun extending its mining activities and developing the railway and the deep water port of Boca Grande for overland shipment and transloading to ships.

In 1906, when railway president L. M. Fouts, his engineers and sixty laborers stepped from the steamer Mistletoe onto the Boca Grande beach to begin work for the railroad, the only buildings were the original three port personnel buildings, and the inhabitants consisted of the lighthouse keeper, Captain William Lester, and the assistant keeper and his family. While railroad construction got underway, American Agriculture and Chemical Company, through its subsidiaries, was also building a town complete with power station, electricity, telephone, water, sewers, paved streets and sidewalks, rarities in the Florida frontier at that time.

Construction of the CH&N line proceeded from Boca Grande northward. It passed across Gasparilla Island, on trestles and drawbridges over Gasparilla Pass and Gasparilla Sound and progressed through Fort Ogden and Hull to reach Arcadia, forty-nine miles away in 1907. Company repair shops were located in Arcadia. In 1910, the line was extended to connect with the Seaboard Air Line Railway at Bradley Junction and also to phosphate mines around

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Early postcard of the phosphate docks and workers’ homes.

Photograph courtesy of Ramar Group Companies, Inc.
Mulberry. There the railroad linked up with the Atlantic Coast Line at South Mulberry. The line’s ninety trestles totaled over three miles in length. In 1909, the Railway had four locomotives, seventy-nine cars, carried 13,721 passengers, and transported 36,545 tons of freight. In addition to phosphate, it handled shipments of lumber, vegetables, citrus, and livestock that were loaded on the Seaboard Coast Line at its terminals in Plant City and Mulberry. By 1917, the Charlotte Harbor and Northern had expanded to eleven locomotives, 217 freight cars, fifteen passenger cars, and fifty-six units of work equipment.

The railroad depot at Boca Grande, constructed between 1909 and 1913, at Park and Fourth Streets in the center of town, has been an important Florida landmark since it was built as the extreme western terminal of the line. Linking the mainland with the island, the railroad provided the only access to the Charlotte Harbor port other than by water. To serve its employers and construction personnel on the island, the railroad expanded from its original cargo-transporting
capacity to include passengers, baggage, food and all the other necessities for living in an isolated community.

The building was completed in two sections: the first twelve-bay southern section about 1910, and a nine-bay northern section in 1913. First floor interior areas included waiting rooms, restrooms, ticketing, and baggage facilities. The second story served as office headquarters for railroad and dock operations. For a time, part of the space was leased by the United States Customs Service. Tongue-and-groove siding, the material of boxcar interiors, was installed as wainscoting, paneling, ceiling and counter facings. The building had hardwood floors throughout and red tidewater cypress trim.

Because the area was noted for its abundant sport fishing grounds, the company also built a small inn primarily to accommodate company executives. They soon saw the possibilities of a tourist trade. The excellent fishing, the wonderful climate and the natural beauty of the island were splendid advantages for an industrial-transport operation.

In 1913, Karl P. Abbott, at age twenty-four, was hired by Peter B. Bradley, president of American Agriculture and Chemical Company, to manage and expand the small Gasparilla Inn. He arrived to find an embryonic town containing the railroad station, a red brick general store, a drugstore, four residences the CH&N had built for its officers, an unpainted frame church, a schoolhouse, and the little inn. Abbott recalled: “I met Mr. Fouts, president of the railroad, who was in charge of everything . . . the pilots, Captain I. W. and Will Johnson . . . and all the
old-timers – Jeff Gaines, the postmaster; Jerome Fugate, the druggist; a man named Gilligan who ran the general store; and John Riley, the superintendent for the company. In a little room in back of the store, Louis Fouts, son of the elder Fouts, had opened a bank.\textsuperscript{8}

Young Karl Abbott was faced with the responsibility of building and furnishing a new, larger hotel complete with lounge and clubroom, dining room and kitchens, and ninety bedrooms, each with private bath. The property also was to include quarters for service employees and guides, a powerhouse, boathouse and bathing pavilion on the beach, and landscaping. Abbott went to Colebrook, New Hampshire, at one point during the construction, and hired a “hard-working New England” hotel crew. Miss Hattie Rhoda Mead, from Sloane’s Department Store in New York, did the decorating. When all was ready for Abbott’s grand opening, in the summer of 1913, there was just one thing wrong—he had no bookings!

His first reservation request came from a prominent and famous Boston dowager. With tongue-in-cheek and many rooms at hand, Abbott requested a “social reference” for her. This so amused the lady that she told her friends about the Inn that accepted only “the right people”, and the word spread fast. The “right” people came: the Saltonstalls, Russells, and Cabots joined the Drexels and Biddles who arrived from Philadelphia, the DuPonts from Wilmington, and George Eastman, the camera executive from Rochester.

Again, the railroad was the catalyst. Travelers could board the Silver Star in New York, have Pullman cars and a diner at their disposal, and arrive in Boca Grande twenty-four to twenty-six hours later. Some of these vacation families later purchased property on the island, and built the fabulous winter homes that to this day line the beachfront and hide behind great privacy walls and lush tropical foliage.

Barron Collier, the noted publisher, purchased the Gasparilla Inn from American Agriculture in 1930, and in the 1950s, Bayard Sharp took it over. The old Inn, refurbished occasionally, and with a sporty eighteen-hole golf course attached, still retains its nostalgic charm and character. As in the past, it caters to the well-to-do gentry.

The railway and the town have undergone more extensive changes. In 1928, the Seaboard Airline Railroad acquired all of the capital stock of the CH&N and absorbed the operations of the Boca Grande Route.\textsuperscript{9} Until 1958, the railroad was the only land transportation link with the mainland. In that year, the Boca Grande Causeway was built. Until then, a friendly ferry ride provided transportation for islanders who needed to get to the mainland for doctor and dentist
appointments and necessary shopping trips. The fare was five dollars round trip, eight dollars for out-of-towners.

Lifetime residents today fondly recall their early experiences, though some would be considered great hardships by today’s standards. Mrs. Myrtle Bloempoort, born in Boca in 1915, remembers that in her youth there were only two automobiles on the island, both of which had been brought over on Captain Sprott’s ferry. At the time, the “ferry” for transporting bulky things, like cars, consisted of a motorboat which towed a raft large enough to accommodate whatever cargo it was carrying.

Myrtle’s father had come from New York to Boca Grande when he was about twenty to work as an accountant for the railroad. He and the niece of the owner of a small hotel called “Palmetto Inn” were married on the island. Myrtle thinks of her childhood as “the most wonderful time.” She remembers the stiff white collars, straw “boaters,” and seersucker jackets all the men wore. The band concerts especially bring back warm memories. Her father played the trombone and founded a band made up of company employees, guides, fishermen, and anyone else who could
play an instrument, including Karl Abbott, the Inn’s manager, on the alto horn. Sunday afternoon concerts were commonplace events, but the band played for special events, too. For one such event, they travelled to the three-day Gasparilla festival in Tampa and participated in the general merriment.

Myrtle married at eighteen and left the island to “see the world.” The young couple moved to Boston, where Myrtle soaked up the big-city ways, history of the venerable city and its culture. When the marriage floundered, where did she head? Back to Boca, of course, where she worked for a time at the Western Union office located in the depot, and then opened a sportswear shop which she ran for twenty years.

The San Marco was the town's movie theater, a wooden structure with a tin roof and shell floor. A good rainstorm drowned out the film soundtrack. Everyone came to the theater, with the winter residents, like the Crowninshields and DuPonts, having boxes with their names on them. Myrtle and her husband, Jan, a builder, recently bought the theater and plan to renovate it, possibly converting it into boutique shops.\(^{10}\)

The town had three churches, Baptist, Methodist, and Episcopalian, all housed in frame buildings. The Catholic church, the Chapel of Our Lady of Mercy, is a mission-style building on Park Avenue and was built in 1950. The first school was a one-room building with grades one through eight. Those who sought higher education went to the mainland. In 1929, one of the original “winter people,” Mrs. Crowninshield, was instrumental in having a new twelve-grade school built. Today that school is the Community Recreation Center.

Mrs. Thomas Cost (Pansy, as everyone knows her) is another native of the island. Her mother and father met there in 1919, and were married shortly thereafter. Her mother’s relatives worked for the railroad, her paternal grandfather was employed in construction, and her father followed in his footsteps. Pansy insists that Boca Grande never felt any severe effects of the Great Depression. Life continued just as before with the shipping operation and construction the mainstays of the economy. Pansy supervises the town’s unique library, and she is the guardian of the historical bits and pieces concerning Boca Grande. She laments the fact that very little documented material has survived and most of that is in private scrapbooks and memories. Her knowledge and pictures of the old Inn and ferry are among her treasurers.\(^{11}\)

The library was the inspiration of attorney Roger Amory of Boston, one of the distinguished winter residents during the 1940s. Mr. Amory, a collector of rare manuscripts and first editions, conceived of a library as a leisure center and not only as a place where people could go for research, reading, and study. As a result, the building he had erected in 1949 is a storehouse of
treasures as well as a tranquil oasis for travels of the mind. Six coquina rock steps lead to its massive pair of cypress doors. Coquina rock walls, a cypress ceiling, and red tile floor form the entrance hall overlooking landscaped courtyards, where visitors can relax, rest, read, or just enjoy the peaceful atmosphere.

Inside, the library contains an estimated 15,000 volumes in the shelf-lined room off the entrance hall. Some of Amory’s early editions are within easy reach of the visitor. Kept under lock are more valuable collections, some up to 500 years old. In a glass case built into the coquina rock walls rests a chained manuscript labeled as “written before the birth of Christopher Columbus.” Even in the limited open hours of summer, it is a meeting place for the islanders. The name, The Johann Fust Community Library, honors the man who financed Gutenberg’s invention of movable type and made mass publishing possible.

One of the most interesting old houses in town has a fascinating history described by its current owner, James M. Ingram, a physician, in Journey’s End – the history of an island home. A man named Stackhouse (no first name is recorded) came to Boca as a gang-foreman with the railroad builders. He acquired land on the beach just outside the existing plat of the village and engaged a contractor B. S. Barnett, to build a house. Dr. Ingram reports: “Virgin heart-pine for the house was cut between Arcadia and Wauchula. This lumber, together with laborers, tools, bricks and several mules, was floated down the Peace River, across Charlotte Harbor, and then through the bayou, in one large flotilla of wooden barges. On arrival on the bayou side of the island, Mr. Barnett’s crew cut cabbage palm logs and laid a corduroy road. All the material for the house was hauled by mules on this road across the island. The house was begun and completed in 1914.” In less than two years, Stackhouse disappeared and left the premises to the mercy of weather and vandals. “In 1921,” Ingram writes, “the area’s worst hurricane rolled the Gulf in from the west and over the island. Whatever windows, doors and furniture that had not been taken from the house by vandals were blown to the mainland. Over a foot of sand covered the floor, but the house survived its first of seven hurricanes.”

Over a period of years and a series of owners, including the Anthony B. Drexels, the house acquired additions, extra rooms, and cottages. Dr. Ingram has owned it since 1962. The original
heart-pine lumber was so hard it defied nails and saws. There was virtually no rot, and the house has remained impervious to termites, without chemical preservation, for forty-eight years.

When port facilities fell into disrepair a few years ago and required expensive reconstruction, Seaboard decided to abandon Boca Grande in favor of other ports. The busy little station, which had been the island’s lifeline, town meeting place, and center of communication for the village, stood idle. In 1978, Ramar Group Companies, Inc., led by Robert A. Morris, an architect, bought the depot as part of a corporate program of purchasing and restoring historic buildings in southwest Florida. The following year, the Boca Grande depot was entered on the National Register of Historic Places. The restoration project is an absorbing one for Mr. Morris who asserts: “I think that one of the responsibilities of an architect is to preserve the things that were there before he got there.”

Ramar work crews have painstakingly dismantled narrow tongue-and-groove boxcar siding, scraped untold layers of paint, sanded and refinished, and repaired weighted rope-and-pulley window sashes to perfect working order (even some of the original pane glass was saved). They have exposed narrow wood lath under boar’s hair strengthened plaster and replaced materials damaged in a boiler-room fire that charred much of the original southern section. They have salvaged everything possible and duplicated where necessary. As part of this restoration process, the manufacturer of the original French tile roofing replaced broken tiles with identical reproductions.

The Gasparilla Inn’s bathhouse at the beach was blown away in a severe storm in the early 1920s.

Photograph courtesy of Ramar Group Companies, Inc.
The abandoned Charlotte Harbor and Northern Railway station as it looked when Ramar Group Companies, Inc., bought it in 1978 to restore it and maintain its historical significance at Boca Grande.

Photograph courtesy of Ramar Group Companies, Inc.

The restored station, with the addition of a tower and paved terrace, retains its nostalgic character and serves as a focal point of community activity.

Photograph courtesy of Ramar Group Companies, Inc.
Built of white sand brick, with interior walls of red brick faced with plaster, the original two-story building is 141 by 36 feet. Mediterranean Revival influence is evident in the hip roof of clay tile and an arcaded loggia covering the entrances. A balustraded gallery runs the length of the building under a seven-foot overhang of the roof. Another distinguishing feature is the carved toe bracing, keyed and tenoned to the rafter butts at the cornice. The ticket office’s bay window furnishes visibility up and down the tracks. A pair of glass bay windows face the street.

In restoring the structure, the Sarasota-based Ramar Group added extensive decking on the west side to foster community use of the area as a meeting place. An exterior stairway, roofed and braced like the main building, gives access to the west gallery and to shops and offices on the second floor. A restaurant, retail shops, and a savings and loan association occupy the ground floor. An historic marker at the front entrance identifies the building and its place in the history of the village of Boca Grande. A tree, planted in 1954 by the Boca Grande Women’s Club and dedicated to the “Spirit of Christmas,” has served as the community’s Christmas tree each year. The whole community gathers around and sings carols, perpetuating a tradition that is symbolic of the great unity among the islanders.

The activity at the port is now limited to oil shipments from Venezuela, Texas and Louisiana. Oil comes in on tankers and is transloaded to inland barges and sent on to Florida Power and Light in Fort Myers.

The last passenger train to Boca Grande. The photo comes from a collection of the late Bernard Mendes, but its exact date cannot be confirmed.

Photograph courtesy of Ramar Group Companies, Inc.
Captain Carey Johnson longs for the exciting days of his piloting career when the port bustled with activity and sailors came from many foreign nations. The captain muses: “We shipped over two million tons of phosphate to all over the world for fertilizer to help feed the world. I felt like I was doing something.” Indeed, all the islanders can claim they have helped make Boca Grande a very special place in the past that they hope to preserve for the future.

1. Acts and Resolutions Adopted by the Legislature of Florida at its Sixth Regular Session, Tallahassee, 1897, pp 166-168.
6. Prince, Steamboats, Locomotives and History, p. 94.
7. Drawing Number 7454, Charlotte Harbor and Northern Railway, October 22, 1912.
10. Interview with Mrs. Myrtle Bloempoort, July, 1981.
13. Journey’s End - the history of an island home, pamphlet written by James M. Ingram, M.D.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid.