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Ballast Point

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Ballast Point received its name in the early 1800's. It is not known when the term first began to be used, but the name was coined as a point for schooners to drop their ballast of rocks before proceeding through the 7-9 foot channel in the Hillsborough Bay to the mouth of the Hillsborough River. Tampa.

Tampa became a cow town and Ballast Point became one of several cow pastures. A large spring lake, fed by three artesian springs, was the largest of several artesian springs in the area. It was the first watering hole south of the hand hewn fence that stretched from Hillsborough Bay to Tampa Bay; Bay to Bay Boulevard follows this original fence. Dr. Howell Tyson Lykes kept large herds of cattle in this area, shipping them from his long dock, 3 steers wide, at Ballast Point. He loaded virtually from his own front yard.

The point of land jutting into Hillsborough Bay, called Ballast Point, was early known as a good place to picnic and swim. A narrow rutted road wound around the shoreline from Hyde Park to Gadsden Point, which later became Beautiful Bayshore Boulevard.

By 1894, a streetcar line was running along the bricked road along the shoreline, from downtown Tampa to Ballast Point. Mrs. Chester W. Chapin built a beautiful pavilion at the end of the line. It was of oriental design with little wooden dragons cavorting along the roof and eaves. The two story structure looked out over the clear water of Hillsborough Bay, with a park of many acres surrounding it. A theatre and dance floor were on the second floor. The first floor had a restaurant where shore dinners were served; a bathhouse where bathing suits could be rented; and a daring two story tobogan slide into the water. The park had amusements for adults and children. There was a ferris wheel and playground equipment. Animals were enclosed within a fence that surrounded the banyan tree. The grounds provided ample space for families to lay tablecloths and spread lavish picnics from baskets.

When Tampa Electric Company bought the streetcar line and park, Mr. Arthur Dervaes, Sr. became the first superintendent. It had been named Jules Verne Park by Mrs. Chapin. The Hillsborough County Historical Commission Marker, near the pier, reads: "Mrs. Chester W. Chapin, controlling owner of the company which operated the city's first electric trolley cars, purchased these acres and in 1894 developed this site into a tropical park as terminal for her line. She named it for the French writer, Jules Verne, (1814-1905) who in his famed novel From the Earth to the Moon, first published in 1865, chose a site near Tampa as his launching site for the imaginary shot of his rocket to that planet nearly 100 years ago."

The beautiful pavilion was severely damaged during the 1921 hurricane. The little dragons on the roof were blown away.

PATTIE DERVAES came to Tampa in 1926 and has lived in Ballast Point and Palma Ceia. She is a past board member of Tampa Historical Society.
trees were uprooted, tropical flowers and foliage were killed by saltwater. The animals were set free during the height of the storm, as they could instinctively find higher ground. Repairs were made on the pavilion, and the surrounding park was cleared of fallen trees and debris. The following year, August 1922, the pavilion was burned to the ground.5

A new one story pavilion was erected on the point, with a long pier extending over the water, for fishing, strolling and crabbing with long nets. There was a wide sidewalk leading from the streetcar shed at the entrance to the park, on Interbay Boulevard, through the park and the center of the pavilion onto the pier. About midway through the park was an arbor, with long seats on either side. Flowering vines grew over the latticed top creating a shady, comfortable resting place for stollers and lovers. Also, a fish pond was near the arbor, with 12 inch goldfish.

A bait stand across the street from the streetcar shed sold fishbait of every kind: shrimp, minnows and crabs. There were tasty hot dogs, cold drinks, candy, and of course any kind of fishing tackle anyone could use to catch the many different kings of fish from the pier, depending on the season. They rented rowboats, and choosing the right kind of oar locks and the right size oars was very important. My aunt and uncle, Mr. and Mrs. Hans Salveson, owned the concession, with living quarters behind the business. Uncle Hans owned a motorboat at one time, and I made many trips with him to rescue a boater who was caught in a squall or who had lost an oar.

This pavilion burned in 1937, and another was never built. Today, the pier remains, with fond memories for thousands of Tampans. The park is well kept by the City and there are seats along the pathways to watch the ships coming and going through the Bay, and the many sailboats. The old banyan tree is gone, also, along with thousands of hearts and initials carved into the long roots hanging from the trunk and upper branches. They were carved for an eternity. The gazebo, from which handsome bandsmen once played Sunday concerts, is a silent sentinel, awaiting another happy time.6

As Tampa and Ballast Point passed through and out of the cow pasture era, Ballast Point became a residential section and many changes came about in the little community. By the early 1900’s some fine homes had been built along Bayshore Boulevard, from Hyde Park to Gadsden Point and around Ballast Point.

As the area developed, so did life-support schools, churches and stores. Roads were built, with the streetcars being the main mode of transportation.

Some of the schools already established that Ballast Point children attended were: The Academy of the Holy Names on Bayshore; the Hyde Park School, later named the John Gorrie Elementary School; Woodrow Wilson Junior High School; and the schools in Port Tampa. The High Schools were Hillsborough and Jefferson.

The original Ballast Point School was held in an old three room wooden building, two blocks south of the present Ballast Point School. Classes were held in several grades, with each grade sitting in a single row. The new Ballast Point Elementary School was opened at the beginning of the 1925-26 school year. The Ballast Point School District was formerly the Port Tampa School District. The first trustees were Frank L. Cooper, F.C. Crowe and C.M. Light. Later,
L.B. Farrior and J.L. Clark served on the board. Sarah Chapman was the first principal with an enrollment of 301. The second principal was J.W. Park, with Mr. Thomas R. Robinson becoming the principal in 1927, when the Junior High School was added.7

Mr. Robinson was beloved by his many students who remember him with great affection and respect. Sarah Worth Rutherford still wonders how he could get so much chalk on his suit, while Joe Wegman remembers the tail of a handkerchief dangling from his back pocket, under his coat, as he wrote on the blackboard. We knew him well. Today this school is an elementary school again.

In 1927, H.B. Plant High School opened in Palma Ceia, on 19 acres of land. Students from Ballast Point rode the streetcars, went by bicycle, had cars or walked. Those who rode the streetcars got off at Barcelona and walked the mile or so to and from school for three years. These were memorable times for us. The fun of pulling the trolley boom off the line was always a source of amusement, and the poor conductor could never find out who did it. We never told. Many secrets were shared along the way. Cold weather we bundled up. Hot weather we mopped our brow. Last minute lessons were studied and we crammed for tests.

Ballast Point students excelled in all of Plant’s student activities, with champions in football, basketball, baseball, the Honor Society and the band, to name a few.

From the beginning of Tampa’s history, there have always been stores within easy reach of customers. Ballast Point, too, had stores within easy access.

The Buckeye Grocery, near Ballast Point on Bayshore Boulevard at the foot of Knight’s Avenue, was owned and operated by Mr. and Mrs. Minnie and Clair Cogan. Bayshore Boulevard was a narrow brick road in 1916, with the streetcar running along the shore side. It was also a streetcar stop. The store was built on pilings over the water, with people coming to buy everything from chicken feed to candy. Some came by boat, some by automobile, others on the streetcar, or they walked if they lived in the neighborhoods. Mr. Cogan drove his Buick truck in the mornings to take orders from some neighborhood and Ballast Point customers. He delivered in the afternoon. Free delivery! During the storm of 1921, the store was destroyed. The Cogan’s sold the building and took a holiday. Later, they bought it back, moved it to a new location and continued their prosperous store keeping.8

Mrs. Lou Campbell had a little store in her home at 6003 Interbay Boulevard during the late 20’s and the early 30’s. She sold staples of canned goods, bread, eggs and candy fish suckers which she sold for one cent. Ken Mulder remembers selling flowers or anything he could to get a penny for one of those little fish suckers. She gave credit and went broke. It was the depression and money was scarce. Other little stores in the area were: the Ballast Point Grocery, Abe Hyman’s Meats and Groceries, Joseph Labadie Hardware, Peter Moll General Merchandise, and others.

There was the Ballast Point Bakery, located at First Street, north of Interbay Boulevard. Mr. Lunsford and his two teenaged sons owned it and did the baking in the garage. The bread came out of the Dutch ovens at 3 p.m. each day. Mr. Lunsford often took the first loaf, sliced it, spread it with butter and gave the heavenly morsels to neighborhood
I was one of these, for we lived in back of the bakery. To this day, I think it was one of the greatest acts of kindness of my childhood, to receive a slice of that fresh, hot buttered bread. The smell and taste lingers with me yet, and perhaps with the other children who also had a slice.9

There were several dairies in the area, which started with a cow or two, and expanded as the business grew. Mr. John Houston had a dairy at 3200 Hawthorne Road and Hills Avenue, now MacDill Avenue, in the early 1920's. His cows grazed south of Gandy Boulevard, in the open woods and country. Mr. Houston’s Dairy, at its peak, had 15 cows.10

The largest of the neighborhood dairies was King’s Dairy, located south of Interbay Boulevard near the present Dale Mabry Highway, then a sandy road called Vera. The rutted road ran through palmetto patches back to their home and the dairy, now part of MacDill Field. Mr. King’s cattle grazed on open land. He was a carpenter by trade, with the dairy supplementing his income, until it took all of his time. Bottles were washed by hand, filled and delivered. He bought enough cows to supply customers in Palma Ceia, Ballast Point and Port Tampa. His milk was also sold to the steamships CUBA and FLORIDA at the Port Tampa docks. The dairy was dissolved in 1940 when the government bought their land as part of MacDill Field.11

Churches played a very important part in Tampa history, no less than in Ballast Point history. The early settlers made their way on the sabbath to downtown Tampa by boat, wagon, horseback or on foot. Some had automobiles, which plowed through the deep sand or the mud. Going to church was very important.

In Ballast Point, the earliest churches were held as meetings in private homes, where a few of the faithful gathered for hymn singing and prayer. When more people came than could be accommodated in the home, a move was made to an already existing building or a new one was built.

The Ballast Point Baptist Church was started as a mission of the First Baptist Church, in Hyde Park. First services were held near the ferris wheel in Ballast Point Park, September 1923. Sunday School was held in the superintendent’s office on Sunday afternoons. Later, services were held in a tent. Two lots were given to the Baptist City Mission, on Russell Street; a small church was erected on this property, until 1950, when a new sanctuary was built on Bayshore Boulevard near Ballast Point School.12

The Bayshore Methodist Church was started in the home of Mr. and Mrs. Fred and Ruby Berry, on Bayshore Boulevard and Knight’s Avenue, in 1923. Later a home was bought on Bay Vista, the walls were taken out, a piano was donated and services were held there for many years. People came from Ballast Point and the neighborhood. This church is now located on MacDill Avenue near Euclid.13

Interbay Methodist was started in the home of Mrs. Mary Bruce Alexander in 1923. This church is now located on MacDill Avenue at Interbay Boulevard.14

The First Presbyterian Church sponsored a Sunday School in the afternoons on Elkin Street. It was called the Sydney Lenfestey Memorial Church. His two school teacher sisters conducted the Sunday School, Miss Lizzie playing the piano and Miss Mattie playing the cornet. It never became a church, but it was important in the lives of
some of the children and adults who attended. 15

Geodes have played an important part in the history of Ballast Point. Ballast Point Diamonds, agatized coral, by whatever name they are called, evolved from coral reefs that thrived in Hillsborough Bay 15 million years ago. Many Tampans have excellent collections in their homes, and they are placed in museums worldwide. The Smithsonian Institution has one of the finest collections of Geodes from Ballast Point to be found. They are called Ballast Point Diamonds because they were first found in quantity there. Collections and beauty are not the only uses for Geodes.

F. Hilton Crowe wrote of battles between Ballast Point and Port Tampa boys: "We Ballast Point delinquents gloried in having an apparently inexhaustible source of “chunkable” rocks to be used in repelling invaders from Port Tampa. It was our custom to have a goodly store of geodes at all times. On weekends, we would crouch in the bushes at the main streetcar stops and wait for unwary Port Tampa boys who were rash enough to visit our Ballast Point girls.

"The geodes selected for ammunition were about the size of oranges, were fairly round, and in our expert hands became formidable missiles.

"The geode weapons of Ballast Point had a dangerous counterpart in the coal of Port Tampa. In those days there were many hunks of coal along the railroad tracks in Port Tampa. If a Ballast Point boy had the temerity to go courting in Port Tampa, he dismounted from the streetcar at town limits, and sneaked by devious means to the girl of his choice. His trip was not always successful, even then! 16

Many of us, including me, remember vividly playing with them as if they were toys.

The worst hurricane the city had experienced since the storm of 1848, hit on Tuesday, October 25th, 1921. The worst of the disaster hit Ballast Point along the shoreline. Many miles of streetcar lines were undermined. Of the many experiences I have heard, I'll relate only one.

Nell Strickland Arnold related that she lived on DeSoto Avenue, off the Bayshore and was 7 years old at the time. They lived on an incline that sloped down to the beach on Bayshore, when there was no seawall. During the first part of the hurricane, the water was blown out of the bay. Then the eye of the storm passed over, but no one knew about the eye of the storm. It just became very quiet and calm. Everyone went outside to see the damage with roofs blown off and signs blown down. She and her father walked down to the shore and the muddy bottom of the bay could be seen for a long way out. A lady named Mrs. Green, who lived on Bayshore, went out to see about her boat, during the first part of the storm. She and the boat were washed out into the bay. She could be seen from the shore, but no one could help her. She and the boat were blown across the bay and washed up at what is now Apollo Beach, unharmed.

Nell and her father, and neighbors, were on the shore when the eye of the storm passed over, and the wind came from the opposite direction. It blew the water back into the bay, harder than it did the first time. The wind blew her down on the shore, the water was up to her waist and she couldn't walk. She was rescued by her father. The water came up to the first floor of homes along Bayshore. Pianos, furniture, stoves and litter of all kinds was blown out of houses to litter
yards and streets. A streetcar had gone to Port Tampa and was on the way back when it was swamped at Howard Avenue. The motorman abandoned the car and water covered the trolly, which swayed in the water.  

People who lived along the Hillsborough Bay and in Ballast Point could all tell similar tales.

Another victim of the hurricane was the boathouse and dock at the foot of Hawthorne Road and Bayshore Boulevard. Imogene Hatzel Worth relates that a Mr. Allen built a long dock from the beach out to the deeper water, about 1915. At the end of the beautiful dock, he built a boathouse on pilings, to house his two boats. Mrs. Worth, at that time lived on Chapin Avenue. There wasn’t any other place for young people to gather except Ballast Point Park and that was too far for them, so they enjoyed the dock. With her friends, they would walk through the woods in that area, as there were few homes, and no walkway along the Bayshore. They walked to Mr. Allen’s orange grove at Hawthorne Road, picked some oranges, then walked out onto Mr. Allen’s dock to enjoy the fruit. From the end of the dock, Mr. Wallace F. Stovall’s home could be seen, through the trees. Davis Islands had not been thought of yet, and only a few steamers and schooners could be seen as they made their way to and from the harbor in Tampa. The long dock and boathouse were destroyed during the 1921 hurricane, blown off the pilings into the water. Today, the pilings remain, silent reminders of a by-gone day. The pelicans and other sea birds use them for resting places and to sun themselves.  

The Tampa Yacht and Country Club was organized in 1904. John Savarese was the organizer and the first commodore. The club is located on Interbay Boulevard, adjacent to Ballast Point Park, on the south. The first club building was erected in 1905, at a cost of $7,000. It was a single story building of wood construction, with a concrete foundation. It burned to the ground in December of 1905, destroying all the records. A second club building was erected and this one burned in 1927. A third building was erected, a large rambling two story structure, built over the water. A small yacht basin took care of the splendid sailboats and yachts of members, with a marine ways to haul boats that needed repair out of the water. This club was also lost to fire in 1938.

Edward Bond remembers being at the scene of this fire. The fire trucks had to come a long way, and when they got there, it was impossible to save the building. The firemen brought out tubs of ice cream which Eddie and other people enjoyed while the building burned.

The present Yacht Club is the most lavish of all, with a membership of over 1,200, drawing membership from Tampa’s most influential businessmen. The large yacht basin cares for the many yachts and sailboats of members, with the most modern boat ways to be found.

What of Ballast Point today? Tall pines and spreading oak trees still dot the peninsula. Many brick streets remain to tell of a past boom time. Many old timers remain in their homesteads. It is a place where single family dwellings dominate. But the scene is a changing one. The trolley line was discontinued and dismantled in 1946. The clear water of Hillsborough Bay is brackish and polluted and there is no swimming anywhere along its shore.

Morton Gould was the first present day developer to realize the potential of Ballast
Point. In 1973, he surprised Tampans by building Commodore’s Cove, Phase 1, and in 1977, he built Phase 2, both at Interbay and Bayshore Boulevard, a few blocks south of Gandy Boulevard. He felt the attitude of the public during the 60’s and 70’s was that Ballast Point was a sub-standard area. He felt it was a most desirable area, with its trees, brick roads and proximity to the water.20

Mr. Thomas Spurlin, a developer with the Paragon Group, currently building the newest condominium on Interbay Boulevard, sees this area becoming the most prestigious area in Tampa. It affords easy access to downtown Tampa. The view along Hillsborough Bay is magnificent, overlooking downtown Tampa, Davis Islands and a long view of the bay to MacDill Air Force Base. People who live in this area see it as it has always been, but new people coming into Tampa see it differently. The trends are exciting.21

Ballast Point, from cow pastures to condominiums.

NOTES

1 D.B. McKay, Tampa Morning Tribune, April 19, 1953.

2 Interview with Ken Mulder.

3 Dr. Howell Tyson Lykes, Founder of an Empire”. James M. Ingram, M.D. Sunland Tribune, Vol. IV, November 1978, pg. 32.

4 Personal Interviews.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

7 Ballast Point School, Achievement Booklet, pg. 4.

8 Personal Interview with Mrs. Minnie Cogan.

9 Personal Interview with Mr. F.M. Chiles, Jr.

10 Personal Interview with Mr. Ross Williams.

11 Personal Interview with Mrs. Margie King de la Houssaye.

12 50th Anniversary Booklet, Courtesy Mr. and Mrs. William Jennings.

13 Personal Interview with Mrs. Minnie Cogan and Mrs. F.A. Reed.

14 50th Anniversary Booklet, Courtesy Mr. and Mrs. William Jennings.

15 Personal Interview with Mr. Syd Lenfesty.

16 Tampa Morning Tribune, November 15, 1959.

17 Interview with Nell Strickland Arnold.

18 Interview with Mrs. Imogene Hatzel Worth.

19 Interview with Mr. George Woodham.

20 Interview with Mr. Morton Gould.

21 Interview with Mr. Thomas Spurlin.

22 Other Interviews with Mr. Mel Culbreath, Mrs. Maxine Davis Nesbit, Mr. Joe Byars.