Punta Gorda in 1890: A Photographic Essay

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Punta Gorda became the southernmost terminus of railroads in the United States in 1886. The coming of iron rails opened up southwest Florida for development and provided rapid access to some of the best hunting and sports fishing in the world. The previous year W.H. Wood, a New York City sportsman, had caught a tarpon on a rod and real in Charlotte Harbor and the account of his feat appeared in the *London Observer* and the *Scientific American*. The sport of tarpon fishing was immediately popularized and attracted wealthy sportsmen from both the United States and England. Some who came included Andrew Mellon, John Wannamaker, W.K. Vanderbilt, P. Lorillard, Frederic Remington and Joseph J. Kirkbride.

A Philadelphia physician, Joseph J. Kirkbride was a sports fisherman and hunter in both Florida and Maine. In the late 1880s he was a regular winter visitor to the Charlotte Harbor and St. Johns River areas. He came to Punta Gorda on the Florida Southern Railway and then traveled by steamer to St. James City on Pine Island. The photographs in this article are from the Kirkbride photographic collection in the Library of Congress. The pictures were taken with the first model of the Kodak camera, which was fitted with a lens that was masked to produce a circular negative.
A Florida Southern Railway locomotive at Punta Gorda in 1890. Passenger service to Punta Gorda began in August 1886. The 76-mile route between Bartow Junction and Punta Gorda was narrow-gauge track. This photograph was probably taken on the spur line in Punta Gorda that took passengers directly to the Punta Gorda Hotel.
The Punta Gorda Hotel in 1890. Opened in the winter of 1887-1888, this resort was owned by the Florida Commercial Company, the railroad’s companion corporation. The hotel was the first commercial structure built in Punta Gorda, engaging the labor of about 200 men who had to sleep in tents, there being no other accommodations.
Another view of the Punta Gorda Hotel in 1890. The facility contained 150 rooms, all commanding a view of the harbor.
Charlotte Harbor as seen from the Hotel Punta Gorda in 1890. The hotel’s grounds were beautified with Mareschal Neil roses, camphor trees, and palms. The pleasure pier extended twelve hundred feet into the harbor.
Identified by Kirkbride only as “A Florida Cracker” in 1889, this photograph was taken near Punta Gorda.
The “Alice Howard” on Charlotte Harbor in 1889. This steamer carried the mail and passengers between Cleveland and Fort Myers. The operator was William M. White of Belfast, Maine. The steamer left Cleveland on the Peace River every Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday at 9:30 a.m. and stopped at Punta Gorda, St. James City, and Punta Rassa. Her speed was about 10 miles per hour.
Another view of the "Alice Howard."
Mrs. Wollero, a friend of the Kirkbrides, on the “Alice Howard” in 1889. Most passengers were headed for the San Carlos Hotel at St. James City or for Fort Myers. The season for the San Carlos was between December and April, and the Kirkbrides visited southwest Florida during this time of the year.
The upper deck of the “Alice Howard.”
The U.S. Mail Steamer “Clara” at Charlotte Harbor in 1890. Captained by J.W. Roan, the “Clara” could carry 100 passengers. She ran alternate days with the steamers “Alice Howard” and “Sadie.”