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CEDAR KEY MUSEUM TELLS EXCITING STORY

By HAMPTON DU NN

CEDAR KEY --- This picturesque and historic community is on an island three miles away from the mainland and 22 miles from the nearest U.S. highway --- which is U.S. 19 that winds its way northward from St. Petersburg to Monticello and the Georgia line.

The State of Florida has established a fine museum that successfully preserves the area's past glory, in displays, dioramas and artifacts that serve up some of Cedar Key's past turbulent prominence to visitors.

It's called the St. Clair Whitman Museum because it houses Whitman's Collections. During his lifetime, the gentleman accumulated a private collection on the history of Cedar Key, including numerous documents and photographs, as well as a grand shell collection.

The turbulent history of this area had its beginning when the site was permanently settled in 1842, they tell you at the Museum. However, Cedar Key made its first bid for fame when the cross-state railroad was completed from Fernandina in 1861, opening up an immense lumbering and turpentine industry and providing a valuable port on the broad water of the Gulf of Mexico.

During the Civil War, blockade runners carried cotton, lumber and naval stores for foreign exchange and brought in foof and war materials for the Confederacy. A Federal rain in early 1862 destroyed most of Cedar Key's usefulness and the area was under Federal control for the remainder of the war. The Southern cause was aided, however, by the supplying of much-needed salt evaporated from sea water. A cannon used to defend Cedar Key is on display at the museum (see photo).

A post-war boom was the timber-cutting orgy. They sawed pine, cypress and cedar from the Suwannee basin. Cedar grown on the island was rated the world's finest for the manufacture of pencils. But ruthless exploitation, typical of the era, brought quick collapse of lumbering before the turn of the century.

Cedar Key is located on one of a group of more than 100 keys. Indians used the site for fishing camps and piled a huge mounds of oyster shells. On nearby Seashore Key, the pirate Jean Lafitte buried treasure.