

**Alafia**  
**Alafia River**

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**HILLSBOROUGH COUNTY**  
**HISTORIC RESOURCES SURVEY REPORT**

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## *Alafia*

Situated around the intersection of present-day County Road 39 (a.k.a., Plant City-Picnic Road) and County Road 676 (a.k.a., Keysville Road), the community of Alafia derived its name from the Alafia River. During much of the 19th century Alafia included the areas that would later be named Fort Lonesome, Hurrah, Keysville, Lithia, Picnic, and Welcome. Alafia is one of Hillsborough County's earliest settlements, dating back to at least 1842 when Antoine Wordehoff,<sup>i</sup> a Prussian immigrant, homesteaded in the vicinity. A year later, 14 other families settled in the area through the Armed Occupation Act. The military established Fort Alafia, an Army garrison and supply depot for troops monitoring Seminole Indians, in 1849. By 1850, 42 soldiers were stationed at the fort, one of whom was Mr. Wordehoff. The military cut a crude trail, linking Fort Alafia to Fort Brooke on Tampa Bay. Even into the early 20th century many of the area's roads "were often deep ruts and the ridged up roots of trees made fast going extremely rough." Typical of most military forts, a settlement sprang up near the outpost, numbering almost 100 souls. The fort served as a place of refuge for the White population when conflicts arose between Seminole Indians and settlers. Mr. Wordehoff founded Alafia's post office on September 4, 1855, when he served as the community's first postmaster. After shutting down the fort, the government sold the land to Thomas P. Kennedy on April 1, 1854. Mr. Wordehoff purchased much of this property in 1859 from Henry Proseus and John Darling, executors of Mr. Kennedy's estate. Wordehoff later became a county commissioner in 1863 during the Civil War.<sup>ii</sup>

As homesteaders moved to the area, they built homes. Mrs. Clyde Ann Gibson, a native of Hillsborough County, described an early resident's house that her parents later occupied:

The Buffam house was old but comfortable with a fire place at one end of the large room. The dining table in the center and the end opposite the fire place was the bedroom. The kitchen was a shed room on the back porch and on warm days they left the dining table sitting on this open porch where the meals were served. It was like an outdoor picnic, cedar trees and oaks made this a cool retreat to serve cold water melon, eat fresh oranges or peaches which grew in abundance on this land.<sup>iii</sup>

As the country teetered on the brink of the Civil War, prominent citizens of Hillsborough County gathered at Alafia on November 24, 1860, and urged their representatives to secede. This meeting highlights the importance of Alafia to Hillsborough County. Taking the mandate given at Alafia, and at other places across the state, to heart, Florida officially withdrew from the Union on January 10, 1861. Two months later, in March 1861, Alafia organized a company of mounted men for the Confederate cause.<sup>iv</sup>

Surviving the Civil War, Alafia's population grew to 442 people in 1870. The community's residents were predominately White, with only 67 African Americans. Additionally, only three people were foreign born. Agriculture and cattle dominated the economic pursuits and day-to-day living of most of the settlers.<sup>v</sup> George W. Wells, an

Alafia resident since the 1860s, described the area in a 1877 promotional packet: This portion of the county is very pleasant and agreeable. It is well watered and healthy; the range is somewhat eaten out, but stock do very well yet, especially on the southeast side. There yet remains a large amount of both State and United States lands subject to either homestead or entry. Game is somewhat scarce, but fish abound--chiefly the salt water varieties.<sup>vi</sup>

While questioning some of the more romanticized Florida promotions, Wells proclaimed any hardworking and industrious person could make a comfortable living through toiling the soil in Alafia. Yet, life was not all hard work and no play. Church events, trips to Tampa, and hunting were some of the activities that occupied free time:

Father [Solon Mansell] was very fond of hunting and would always take his dog with him for Ranger was good at tracking just about any kind of small woods animal or birds. My father's double barrel shot-gun and his hunting bag was all he needed with Ranger running by his side if he happened to be walking or on horseback. A bag full of quail or doves, squirrel or rabbit always meant game for dinner. We were very fond of quail, cooked with rice or fried, while the squirrel or rabbit was nearly always roasted over the coals of an outdoor fire built by my father...<sup>vii</sup>

It appears that Mr. Wells' promotion worked as reflected in a December 24, 1881, *Sunland Tribune* description of Alafia:

I desire to say that the point from which I write is located 23 miles east of Tampa, on the Tampa and Fort Meade road, being the middle ground between these two points. I am thus particular as to locality, from the fact that the Alafia country covers considerable distance, and many of your readers cannot, from the simple name Alafia, locate the neighborhood...This section of the Alafia has probably the best farming and fruit lands in the entire county...It is true that most of the lands are owned and occupied by bountide residents, but, generally speaking, they all own more lands than they need, or than they can cultivate, and many of them would willing divide with strangers...it is through this means that we hope to have our favored section fully developed. We know that of the many R.R. now heading hitherward, at least two of them will run immediately through this neighborhood, and the country here being well adapted to small farming and fruit growing is susceptible of close settlements, and at no very distant day we predict that we will be second to none in density of population, and foremost in all of the products peculiar to South Florida.<sup>viii</sup>

By 1885, Alafia had at least 51 farms ranging in size from ten acres owned by W.H. Harman to three plantation size farms of 300 to 400 acres, one each owned by Jas. Tomberlin, A. Wordehoff, and W. F. Burts. These farmers supported three general stores, one owned by George Wells, two Baptist preachers, a blacksmith, a physician, a dentist, and a druggist. The post office was operated by James Frierson who moved from Hernando County to Alafia in 1868 and operated a 200-acre farm in 1884.<sup>ix</sup> Religion played a large role within the community, both spiritually and socially. The same year soldiers occupied Fort Alafia, local residents organized

Alafia Baptist Church under a pine bough arbor, a common structure for churches in rural Hillsborough County during the mid 1800s. Using the arbor for the next forty years the church finally succumbed to expansion pressures and built a new log structure. Most rural churches in Hillsborough County have an associated cemetery, sometimes providing the final resting places for several generations of a single family. These churches and their associated cemeteries render a sense of permanence and security to surviving family members. This is achieved by maintaining physical connections and reminders to the past through the continued presence of the church congregation, structures, and cemetery. People know from whence they came through these connections and reminders, thus providing a foundation in times of change.<sup>x</sup> Coupled with a sense of security, churches also operated as social gatherings for the disparate families of Alafia. Don Carlos gave a compelling description of one of these gatherings held at the Alafia Sunday School:

There was a celebration at Alafia yesterday, given under the auspices of the Alafia Sunday School, which was the most enjoyable affair of the kind ever witnessed in this vicinity before....When the dinner hour arrived the crowd had augmented to upwards 300 people. Cork, Limona, Eureka, Keysville, Hurrah and Ft. Meade were represented. There is no language in which I can describe the quantity and intensity of the female beauty present...It was arranged that the school children should eat first, the ladies and old men next, and then the younger masculine portion of the assemblage; and Mr. Wiggins stood at the entrance of the enclosure with his baton and would not admit any one whom he was instructed not to, no not even a reporter. Our turn came in due time however, and we found the table loaded with the choices viand; pork, bee, chicken and in fact, everything the human palate could long for was there.<sup>xi</sup>

Not surprising given the influx of settlers, in 1871 Alafia established one of Hillsborough's earliest known schools. Five years later, Wordehoff donated an acre of land to the Alafia School District No. 6 trustees for the Alafia Academy. By 1885 the area was noted for good county schools.<sup>xii</sup>

Alafia's population in 1890 consisted of 388 people, 54 less than in the 1870 census.<sup>xiii</sup> This decline, in part, may be explained through the development of communities in regions that Alafia once included. Despite the decline, settlers continued to move to the Alafia area and build homes:

The spring [of 1892]...Henry Frier, who had become a carpenter, was engaged to build the type of home pioneers were living in, -- dressed siding, flooring, shingles, ceiling, bricks for the chimney and glass windows of four panes each, two by fours and studding were ordered from a mill near by while paint and brushes were bought in Plant City from Wells and Son Hardware. For many weeks the sound of hammer and saw could be heard in the otherwise quiet woods, as the new building took shape. There were four rooms with front and back porches, a walk leading to the dining room and kitchen. A huge cedar stood at the rear of the kitchen while giant live and

water oaks stood on either side of the house. A board fence with front and back gates surrounded the house. The horse lot with barns and stables were at the rear. Mother [Sarah Elizabeth Frier] often spoke of this place which housed her six little children together with she and her husband [Solon Mansell] as her happiest years.<sup>xiv</sup>

Alafia witnessed tremendous changes with the dawn of the new century. Timber and phosphate companies began buying land in the hopes of exploiting the area's natural resources. The Warnell Lumber and Veneering Company moved to Plant City from Warnell, Florida, in 1898. This company began buying tracts of land in Hillsborough, Polk and DeSoto counties, including sections around Alafia. Warnell also built a wooden logging tram from Plant City to Keysville, passing through Alafia. Most of the area's timber resources had been felled by the early teens, but the plant remained in operation until 1920. Two general stores operated in Alafia in 1918 -- one owned by M.J. Carpenter and the other owned by former Alafia constable, J.J. Thompson -- but no other businesses appeared to have been supported by the area's 451 residents. The same year Warnell shut down, Alafia's post office, in operation since 1868, closed on November 30, 1920. Durant's post office took over operation for Alafia. This was not an uncommon event in 20th century Florida. The improvement of transportation caused many post offices to shut down.<sup>xv</sup>

Shortly after Warnell constructed its rail line the Florida Central and Peninsular Railroad acquired the tracks and expanded it to Welcome. Following closely on the heels of this expansion, the Seaboard Airline Railroad took control of the line and connected it to Bartow in 1905. With the arrival of regularly scheduled freight and passenger service, Alafia agricultural products were more easily taken to market, and local people could more readily visit friends and families in other parts of the state. Truck farming and citrus growing prospered with the improvement of local roads. U.S. Alafia River Phosphate Company, State Phosphate company, and American Phosphate Mining Company also began investing in the area, but it took many years before large scale mining operations commenced. The Coronet Phosphate Company started, as early as 1911, a washer operation within a stone's throw of the former Fort Alafia.<sup>xvi</sup>

By the 1930s Alafia's population shrunk to 391 residents, and they patronized a small store and filling station located at the intersection of Keysville and Picnic-Plant City Roads. The community has remained rural up through today. Only 2787 people live in the greater Alafia area, which includes portions of Keysville and Hopewell.<sup>xvii</sup>

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i. Antoine Wordehoff's name has been spelled several ways, including Woodchoft, Wordehoff, and Wordhoff.

ii. David E. Bailey, "A Study of Hillsborough County's History, Legend, and Folk Lore, with Implications for the Curriculum" (master's thesis, University of Florida, 1949), 259,261; Alford G. Bradbury and E Story Hallock, *A Chronology of Florida Post Offices* (Port Salerno, FL: The Florida Federation of Stamp Clubs, 1962), 1; Quintilla Geer Bruton and David E. Bailey, Jr., *Plant City: Its Origin and History* (Winston-Salem, N.C.: Hunter Publishing Company, 1984), 23-25; Sharon Grabfelder, "'Fortin up' at Alafia," *Tampa Times* July 16, 1970, 7B; Historic Tampa/Hillsborough County Preservation Board, *The Cultural Resources*

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of the Unincorporated Portions of Hillsborough County: An Inventory of the Built Environment (Tampa, FL: Historic Tampa/Hillsborough County Preservation Board, 1980), 26 (Hereafter Historic Tampa/Hillsborough County Preservation Board will be cited as HTHCPB); D.B. McKay, "Site of Old Ft. Alafia Became Wordehoff Homestead," *Tampa Tribune* February 10, 1952, 5C; Allen Morris, *Florida Place Names* (Sarasota, FL: Pineapple Press, Inc., 1995), 2; Carol Neef, "No Indians, No Fort, All's Quiet Now at Alafia," *Tampa Tribune* July 31, 1970; Pat Patten, "It Happened Yesterday by Pat Patten," *Plant City Courier* September 12, 1968; Ernest L. Robinson, *History of Hillsborough County Florida* (Saint Augustine, FL: The Record Company, 1928), 46; Wanton S. Webb, *Webb's Historical, Industrial and Biographical Florida, Part I* (NY: W.S. Webb & Co., 1885), 57. Quote from Mrs. Charles Gibson, *Pioneering in Hillsborough County, Fla.* (Orlando, FL: Mrs. Charles Gibson, 1972), 29.

iii. Gibson, *Pioneering in Hillsborough County, Fla.*, 26.

iv. Canter Brown, Jr., "Tampa's James McKay and the Frustration of Confederate Cattle-Supply Operations in South Florida," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 70(4)(April 1992), 414; James W. Covington, *The Story of Southwestern Florida*, Volume I (NY: Lewis Historical Publishing Company, Inc., 1957), 140-141; "Scouts Will Mark Fort Alafia," *Tampa Times* March 26, 1965.

v. U.S. Bureau of the Census, *A Compendium of the Ninth Census (June 1, 1870)* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1872), 136; George W. Wells, *Facts for Immigrants, Comprising A Truthful Description of the Five Following Counties of South Florida, To-Wit: Hernando, Hillsboro, Polk, Manatee and Monroe* (Jacksonville, FL: Press Book and Job Office, 1877), 1-6, 14-15.

vi. Wells, *Facts for Immigrants*, 15.

vii. Gibson, *Pioneering in Hillsborough County, Fla.*, 29.

viii. "Alafia Settlement," *The Sunland Tribune*, December 24, 1881, 1.

ix. Gibson, *Pioneering in Hillsborough County, Fla.*, 11-13, 20-21; *Florida State Gazetteer and Business Directory, 1883-1884* (Jacksonville, FL: Cushing & Appleyard, 1883, notes from and portions photocopied, on file Post Office and Postmasters Historical File, Quintilla Geer Bruton Archives, Plant City, FL), 355 (Hereafter Quintilla Geer Bruton Archives will be cited as QGBA); *Florida State Gazetteer and Business Directory, 1886-1887* (NY: South Publishing Company, 1887)(Communities - Alafia Historical File, QGBA); Hillsborough County Real Estate Agency, *Descriptive Pamphlet of Hillsborough County* (Tampa, FL: Hillsborough County Real Estate Agency, 1885), 34; HTHCPB, *The Cultural Resources of the Unincorporated Portions of Hillsborough County*, 26; Robinson, *History of Hillsborough County Florida*, 249.

x. "Alafia Baptist Church, 136 Years, Our Past, Our Present, Our Future, 1850-1986 (Alafia, FL: Alafia Baptist Church)(Churches - Baptist (Misc) Historical File, QGBA, Plant City, FL); "Alafia Baptist Members Gather to Celebrate 119 Years of Church," *Plant City Courier*, October 23, 1969, 6B; Paul E. Dinnis, "Flickering Flames Along the Alafia, circa 1850-1900," (Hillsborough County #1 file, Hampton Dunn Collection, University of South Florida Special Collections), 14. Hereafter University of South Florida Special Collections will be cited as USFSP.

xi. "Alafia and Eureka News," *The Sunland Tribune* May 10, 1879, 3.

xii. Bruton and Bailey, *Plant City: Its Origin and History*, 63; HTHCPB, *The Cultural Resources of the Unincorporated Portions of Hillsborough County*, 26; Webb, *Webb's Historical, Industrial and Biographical Florida*, 57; *When History was in the Making: The Neighborhood Origins of Public Schools in Hillsborough County, 1871-1900* (Tampa, FL: Hillsborough County Schools, 1975), 1.

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xiii. U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Compendium of the Eleventh Census: 1890, Part I - Population*, (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1892), 88.

xiv. Gibson, *Pioneering in Hillsborough County, Fla.*, 27-28.

xv. *Atlas of Hillsborough County, Florida* (Tampa, FL: Dixie Survey and Atlas Company, 1916), 59,97 (on file USF Special Collections and QGBA); Bradbury and Hallock, *A Chronology of Florida Post Offices*, 1; Bruton and Bailey, *Plant City, Its Origin and History*, 108; *Florida State Gazetteer and Business Directory, 1918* (Jacksonville, FL: R.L. Polk & Co., Publishers, 1918), 58; HTHCPB, *The Cultural Resources of the Unincorporated Portions of Hillsborough County, An Inventory of the Built Environment*, 26; Morton D. Winsberg, "The Advance of Florida's Frontier as Determined from Post Office Openings," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 72(2)(1993), 190-191.

xvi. *Atlas of Hillsborough County, Florida*, 59; Bruton and Bailey, *Plant City, Its Origin and History*, 25; James A. Fisher, "The Alafia River: A Key in the Development of Polk and Hillsborough Counties, Florida," Paper presented to The 12th Gulf Coast History and Humanities Conference, Mobile, Alabama, March 9-11, 1989, 6-10 (Hillsborough/Tampa 6N file, Hampton Dunn Collection, USF Special Collections); Gibson, *Pioneering in Hillsborough County, Fla.*, 63-64; HTHCPB, *The Cultural Resources of Hillsborough County, An Inventory of the Built Environment*, 26; "New Phosphate Company," *Tampa Tribune* April 17, 1890, 3; Robinson, *History of Hillsborough County Florida*, 123-124, 141.

xvii. Federal Writers' Project, *Seeing Tampa, A Guide and Handbook of Information to the City and Its Suburbs* (unpublished manuscript, on file USF Special Collections, circa 1930s), 134; Works Progress Administration, "Incorporated Towns," unpublished manuscript, No name file, WPA Collection, USF Special Collections.