

# **Gibsonton**

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## **Alafia River Bullfrog Creek**

7 pgs

The following is an excerpt from:  
**HILLSBOROUGH COUNTY  
HISTORIC RESOURCES SURVEY REPORT**

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Bureau of Historic Preservation**

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\* These excerpts have been taken from the Historic Resources Survey Report with permission given by the Hillsborough County Historic Resources Review Board on December 15, 2003. The intention is to help provide targeted historical information on the water bodies in Hillsborough County.

***Gibsonton (Gardenville, Garden City, Florida Gardenlands, Remlap, and Adamsville)***

Situated along U.S. 41, just south of the Alafia River, present-day Gibsonton consists of several historic communities including Adamsville, Gardenville, Garden City, Remlap, and Gibsonton: Adamsville was located south of Bullfrog Creek in the area of present day Pembroke Road, Garden City straddled Bullfrog Creek, Gardenville stretched from Gibsonton Drive to just south of Bullfrog Creek (incorporating part of Garden City), Remlap was situated between Gardenville and Adamsville, and Gibsonton existed between the Alafia River south to Gibsonton Drive. While today Gibsonton is famous for its carnival community which came to the area in 1924, the community's history reaches back into the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>i</sup>

James Gibson, Sr., became one of the area's first settlers when he, along with his family, arrived from Greenville, Alabama, in 1884. He homesteaded 150 acres at the mouth of the Alafia River, stretching to the east for approximately a half a mile along the south bank of the river. Other families settled on the north and south sides of the Alafia, some coming from various regions of the United States, others from England, France, and Germany. Mr. Gibson, along with Granville Platt and F.L. Henderson, became trustees of a school erected in the 1888.<sup>ii</sup>

Shortly after the birth of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Gibsonton area underwent tremendous change. Beginning in 1907, T.M. Wier had the Gardenville Town Site surveyed. Three year later W.D. Davis filed the plat for Florida Gardenlands, which was the "rural" complement to his more suburban Garden City subdivision. Mr. Davis served as president and treasurer of Davis Mercantile Company which was headquartered in Suite 9 and 10 of the Hampton Building located at the corner of Franklin and Polk Streets in Tampa, Florida.<sup>iii</sup> Preceding the Florida land boom by a decade, but foreshadowing its promotional hype, Mr. Davis reprinted letters from "happy" property buyers who touted the advantages of living in his development in a 1911 brochure. Mrs. C.A. Henderson wrote:

I, by merest accident, found a modest advertisement in Everybody's Magazine of February. I immediately corresponded with the owner (not agent) of the lands. I was favorably impressed, as there were no impossible statements made, but the temporary drawbacks shown as well as the results, if one goes at it with energy and enthusiasm.

My first visit out to the lands was one of delight and satisfaction, and I purchased three lots, had one cleared and a small cottage built, ready for our family to go to the coming fall.

On the lands can be raised all kinds of vegetables, oranges and grapefruit. I visited a large grove adjoining these lands that was a marvel to me. I was informed this season's crop had netted the owner \$8000.00 on the trees.

Fish and oysters just 1/4 mile from my house; who could wish for anything better? A few inconveniences will be experienced for a year or two, for it is like any new country; but the air we breathe there from the beautiful Hillsborough Bay is so life giving that the few inconveniences seem nothing.

I believe all settling at Garden City will soon decide they have found the Fountain of Youth. I remained there ten days, and all I met were delighted with the climate, and the soils were good, and they were making themselves homes. Just one item for the young ladies: I met several charming young bachelors that I know will make ideal husbands in this ideal climate.<sup>iv</sup>

Prices ranged from a mere \$50 a lot to \$600 for a single bayfront lot. On any lot less than \$125 purchasers were only required to put \$5 down in cash and to pay \$3 a month. Lots costing more than \$125 required \$10 down in cash and the remaining sum payed off in \$5 month increments. Earl Lincoln Adams and Rosie Manners Adams could not pass up such a deal. In 1910 they bought land in the southern part of Florida Gardenlands and raised ten children on their homestead. This section of Mr. Davis' development became known as Adamsville, in honor of these early prospectors.<sup>v</sup>

With such promotions, the entire area prospered. In 1911 children attended the newly erected Gardenville School. A year later the Gardenville post office began delivering mail on October 1, 1912, and continued to operate until June 30, 1925, whereupon mail came from Limona. By 1918 Gardenville's population reached 125. The community was linked to Tampa by way of a shell road and ferry service across the Alafia River. These residents supported F.C. Lucy's general store, J.B. Bison, Jr.'s, law office, R.L. DeMay's boat building business, M. Alderman's carpentry business, and R. Adler's cobbler shop. Additionally, poultry breeding, orange growing, and fishing were the mainstay for many of Gardenville's families. James B. Gibson, the founder of Gibsonton, was listed as an orange grower in 1918, and M.D. Davis operated a sawmill in the community. Between 1918 and 1925 Gardenville grew by 25 people. The Tampa Southern Rail Road operated a rail line through the community, and the shell road to Tampa had been covered in asphalt. Since the paving of the road, two garages operated in Gardenville. Additionally, two grocery stores and a general store sold their wares to residents. James Gibson was listed as a lawyer, notary and real estate agent. Mebane & Covington Lumber Company replaced Mr. Davis' sawmill and H.B. Turner was the area's ice manufacturer. A year later a new school was built on Symmes Road, replacing the older building which was located on present-day U.S. 41. By 1930, Gardenville's population sprouted to 614, consisting of 352 males and 262 females, 566 were White and 46 were Black. The majority of Gardenville's White population were natives with only 34 being foreign born.<sup>vi</sup>

Not wanting to miss out on the action, James Gibson founded "Gibsonton on the Bay" in 1923. Directly across the Alafia River, U.S. Phosphoric Products Company built a phosphate plant in 1924. The phosphate plant served as a boon to locals through either

employment or property purchases. For example, Bob Nicholas had purchased 25 acres in 1895 for \$153 which he later sold to U.S. Phosphoric for approximately \$150,000. On July 21, 1926, Gibsonton received a post office. By the 1930s, the office delivered mail to nearly 300 residents engaged in a variety of farming and commercial enterprises, as reflected in this 1930s description:<sup>vii</sup>

Gibsonton...is a modern community, located on the south bank of the Alafia river. It is a favorite haunt of fishermen. Settled in 1895 the community was later given the name of 'Gibson Town' in honor of J. Barney Gibson, one of the pioneer residents....The region around Gibsonton interests the archaeologist as well as the treasure hunter as there is a large Indian burial ground in the vicinity. At one time there were many shell mounds here but most of these were leveled to furnish the shell for road construction.

Much of the shell was scattered over the nearby terrain and mixing with the muck, former a soil excellent for citrus and vegetable culture. Limes and lemons grown here have an especially delicious flavor. The only bearing olive tree in Florida grows in this soil on the Gibson farm. It measures 35 feet in height.

Numerous artesian wells and protection from frosts are additional assets to the farmer in this area.

Present-day Gibsonton has most of the convenience of a modern city, having running water, a sewerage system, electricity, and various mercantile establishments. A large tourist and trailer camp are additional facilities for visitors.<sup>viii</sup>

Shortly after the founding of Gibsonton, Grace and Eddie LeMay visited the area in 1924, camping on and fishing from the banks of the Alafia. Once their vacation ended, the couple returned to their job of operating cook houses on carnival midways. Liking what they saw in Gibsonton, they returned and opened a restaurant called Eddie's Hut. This humble beginning began a long relationship between Gibtown -- the name that carnival residents gave to Gibsonton -- and carnival workers. Friends and coworkers followed the LeMays to Gibsonton, drawn by the mild winters and success of Eddie's Hut.<sup>ix</sup>

Aurelio and Bernice "Jeanie" Tomaini were one such couple. Shortly after meeting and falling in love in 1936, the Tomainis traveled to Tampa to visit friends. The couple ventured to Gibsonton, falling in love with the place. They returned to Gibsonton for the next four winters, fishing and camping. In 1941, the Tomainis decided to buy property. They found a 3.5 acre site with a couple of old buildings on the south side of the Alafia River which they proceeded to convert into a fishing camp consisting of a restaurant, a bathhouse, fifteen wooden cottages and 12 mobile homes, a picnic area, and boat slips.

Still working the carnival circuit during the summer, the couple fixed up the camp during the winter months. When their daughter Judy was born, the Tomaini family moved to Gibsonton permanently. Named after Mr. Tomaini, who was 8-feet-4 inches tall, Giant's Fishing Camp quickly became a local landmark.<sup>x</sup>

Gibsonton continued to grow as more and more carnival workers ("carnies") migrated to the area. In 1945 Gibsonton had a population of 1091, consisting of 1058 Whites and 33 Blacks. Because of the seasonal nature of carnival work, Gibsonton's population would peak between November to May when residents recuperated from months on the road, renewing friendships, catching up on gossip, and falling in love. Yet life in Gibtown was not all play and no work. Down time in Gibsonton included ride repair, act improvement and development, and booking for the next season.<sup>xi</sup> By 1957 Gibsonton had developed into a strong community despite the seasonal migration of the majority of its population:

Gibsonton sprawls over 1,000 flat acres which are spotted with 900 houses, two churches, several grocery stores, and other assorted places of business, a tiny post office, three trailer parks, and, the nub, The Giant's Fishing Camp. It's a conservative Republican town. In the last election the 800 registered voters all went GOP.<sup>xii</sup>

Gibsonton, however, grew at the expense of its neighboring communities, swallowing Adamsville, Gardenville, and Garden City. When U.S. 41 was widened from two to four lanes in the mid-1950s, the growth of Gibsonton accelerated. Carnival people and non-carnival people alike were impacted. The Tomainis had to move their restaurant, as it was in the way of the expanding road, and lost some of their land in the process. In 1959 the Gardenville School closed, replaced by Gibsonton Elementary School and high school students were shipped off to Wimauma. As housing developments and trailer parks sprang up, cattle ranchers and farmers were pushed further and further east of Gibsonton. Further competition for land arose from tropical fish farms which began operation in Hillsborough County during the 1930s and have steadily increased over the years. In 1960, a mere 1673 people called Gibsonton home. By 1975, the community's population doubled from the summer low of 2500 to the winter peak of 5000 people. Within five years, Gibsonton's winter population grew to 8000 people and by the 1990s it has reached nearly 14,000 residents during off season.<sup>xiii</sup>

Other changes have occurred as well. During the 1970s, the whole carnival industry went through transformations. During the height of its popularity in the 1930s and 1940s, nearly 100 carnival side shows competed against one another. By the 1970s, while approximately 500 circuses still existed, a mere seven side shows remained in operation, four owned by one Gibsonton resident. Medical advancements eliminated or removed many physical deformities that motivated the young to join the circus. In response, big ride attractions began taking a more prominent stage in carnivals. In the 1930s, a big carnival might have had only 12 rides in comparison to possibly three dozen side shows. Forty years later, the same carnival would have nearly 80 rides with only five side shows. The invention of television further cut into carnival revenues, and the establishment of the minimum wage further cut into profits. Gibsonton began transforming itself into an

carnival retirement community. Additionally, in 1968, the International Independent Showmen's Association started its first annual trade show in Gibsonton. By the mid-1970s, the outdoor amusement trade show had become the largest in the world, attracting buyers and displayers from as far away as Latin America and Europe.<sup>xiv</sup>

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i. Susan M. Green, "There was Always Something Good to Eat in The Kitchen," *Tampa Tribune* October 26, 1997, 2-Brandon; Pattie Harris, "Long-time Resident Tells of Gibsonton Past," *East Bay Breeze* October 5, 1988, 4.

ii. James B. Gibson, Jr., "Gibsonton," (Gibson Bible Record family file, Hillsborough County Historical Commission, Tampa Bay History Center); HTHCPB, *The Cultural Resources of the Unincorporated Portions of Hillsborough County*, 40.

iii. Garden City promotional brochure courtesy of Jeanie and Pete Johnson, Gibsonton, FL; Plat Book 2, page 87-89, Clerk of the Circuit Court of Hillsborough County, Tampa, FL; Plat Book 4, page 74, Clerk of the Circuit Court of Hillsborough County, Tampa, FL.

iv. Garden City promotional brochure.

v. Garden City promotional brochure; "Reading Maps Will Give You Clues About Local People & Events" (courtesy of Jeanie and Pete Johnson, Gibsonton, FL.)

vi. Bradbury and Hallock, *A Chronology of Florida Post Offices*, 32; Bureau of the Census, *Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930, Population Bulletin, Second Series, Florida, Composition and Characteristics of the Population*, 52; *Florida State Gazetteer and Business Directory, 1918*, 185; *Florida State Gazetteer and Business Directory, 1925*, 273; "Time Line" (courtesy of Jeanie and Pete Johnson, Gibsonton, FL.)

vii. *Atlas of Hillsborough County, Florida*, 56; Bradbury and Hallock, *A Chronology of Florida Post Offices*, 33; HTHCPB, *The Cultural Resources of the Unincorporated Portions of Hillsborough County*, 41; Gibson, Jr., "Gibsonton"; Plat Book 10, page 17, Clerk of the Circuit Court of Hillsborough County, Tampa, FL.

viii. Federal Writers' Project, *Seeing Tampa*, 122-124.

ix. HTHCPB, *The Cultural Resources of the Unincorporated Portions of Hillsborough County*, 40; Michael Pool, "Going to Gibtown," *Weekly Planet* January 5-11, 1995, 4.

x. Pool, "Going to Gibtown," 4; Jack Denton Scott, "The Strange People of Gibsonton," *The American Weekly* July 28, 1957; Bayard Steele, "Giant's Camp: Gibsonton's Favorite Spot," *Tampa Times* March 6, 1982, 3A.

xi. Yvette Cardozo, "The Odds are not Against Them," *Floridian* April 27, 1975, 12; Scott, "The Strange People of Gibsonton;" William Schmidt, "Where Life is a Carnival," *Newsweek* April 7, 1975, 12; *The Seventh Census of the State of Florida, 1945*, 32; Dale Wilson, "Fred Thumberg's Thrill Rides Get Rest and Repair at Grassy Gibsonton Field," *Tampa Times* March 17, 1977, 1B.

xii. Scott, "The Strange People of Gibsonton."

xiii. Cardozo, "The Odds are not Against Them," 12; Harris, "Long-time Resident Tells of Gibsonton Past," 4; *Hillsborough County Florida Public Schools: A Survey Report* (Nashville, TN: Division of Surveys and Field Services, George Peabody College for Teachers, 1966), 3; HTHCPB, *The Cultural Resources of the*

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*Unincorporated Portions of Hillsborough County*, 41; Jeanie and Pete Johnson, interview by Geoffrey Mohlman and Teresa Maio February 3, 1998; Pool, "Going to Gibtown," 4; Schmidt, "Where Life is a Carnival," 12; Steele, "Giant's Camp," 3A.

xiv. Cardozo, "The Odds are not Against Them," 14; Tom Denham, "The Show Before the Show," *East Hillsborough Tribune* February 3, 1977; Tom Denham, "Showpeople Have A Place in the Sun," *East Hillsborough Tribune* November 10, 1977, 5-F; Richard Dodge, "Show Folks Happy in Retirement Home," *Tampa Times* March 14, 1975, 3-D; Eric Gerard, "The Greatest Show on Earth May Not be at a Carnival," *East Hillsborough Tribune* December 16, 1976, 1F,2F; HTHCPB, *The Cultural Resources of the Unincorporated Portions of Hillsborough County*, 41; Pat Leisner, "Carnival Atmosphere Lives on in Gibsonton," *Tampa Times* March 8, 1975, 5-B; Jon Nordheimer, "Carnival," *New York Times Magazine* April 15, 1979, 12.