

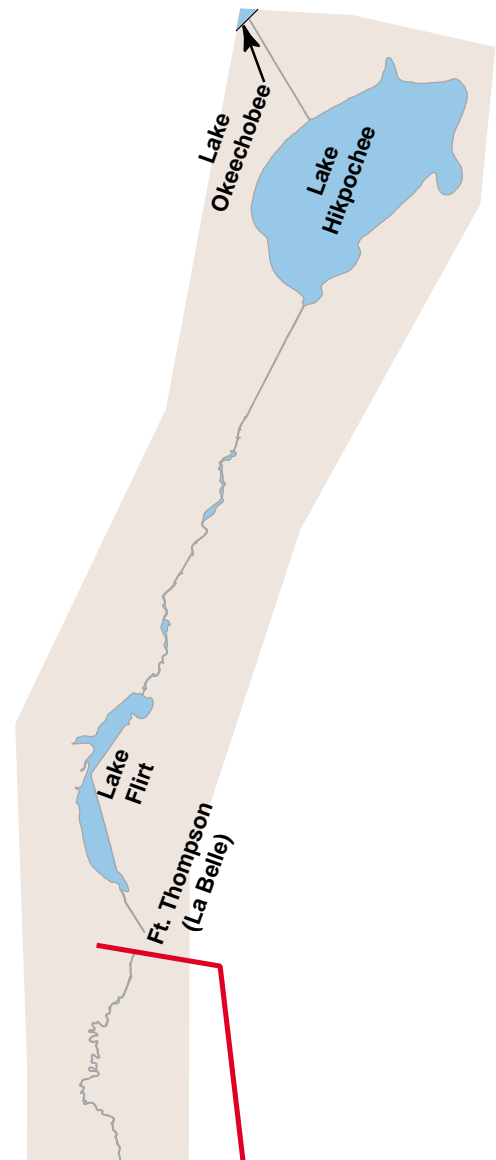
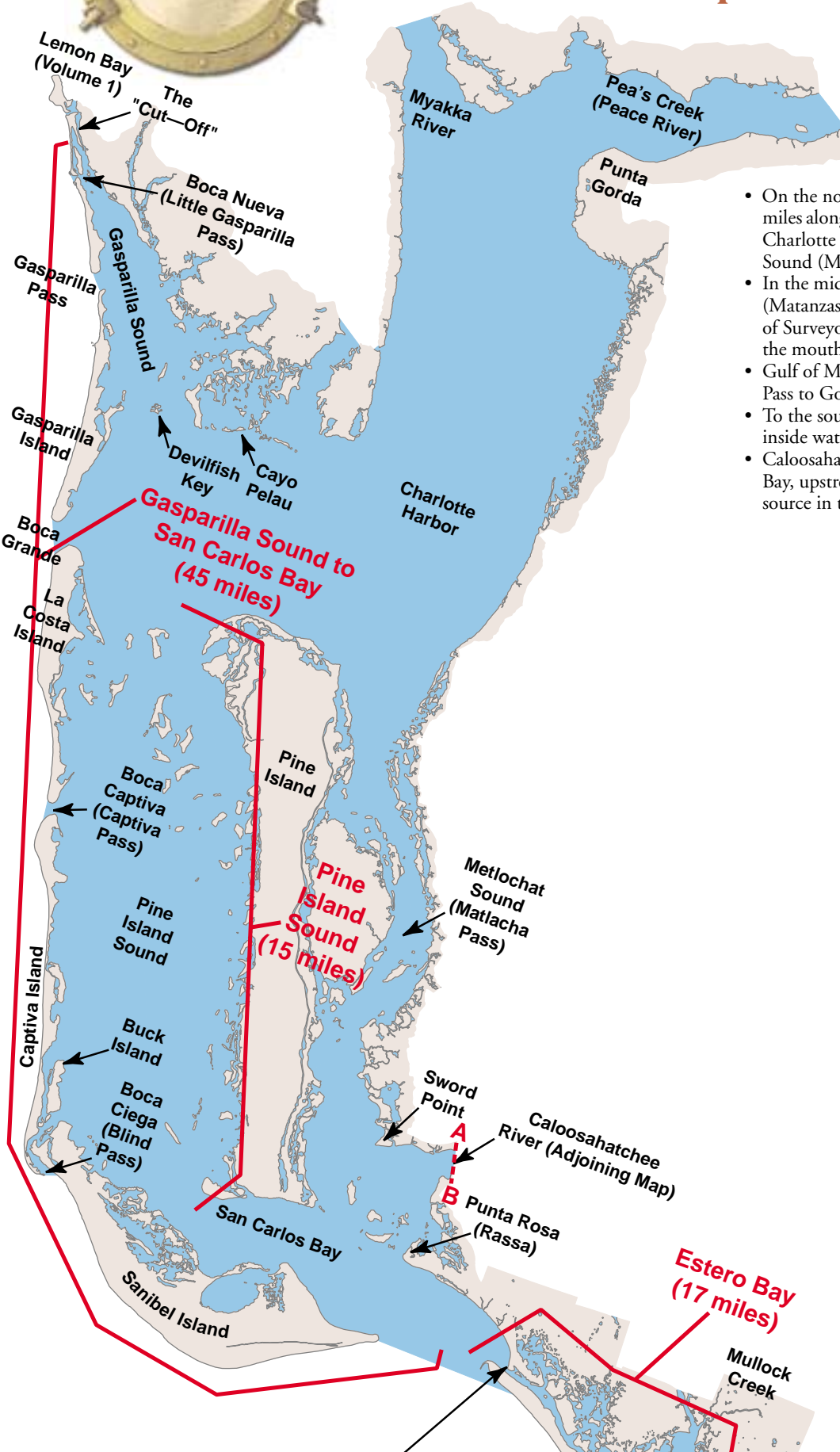
HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF SOUTHWEST FLORIDA WATERWAYS

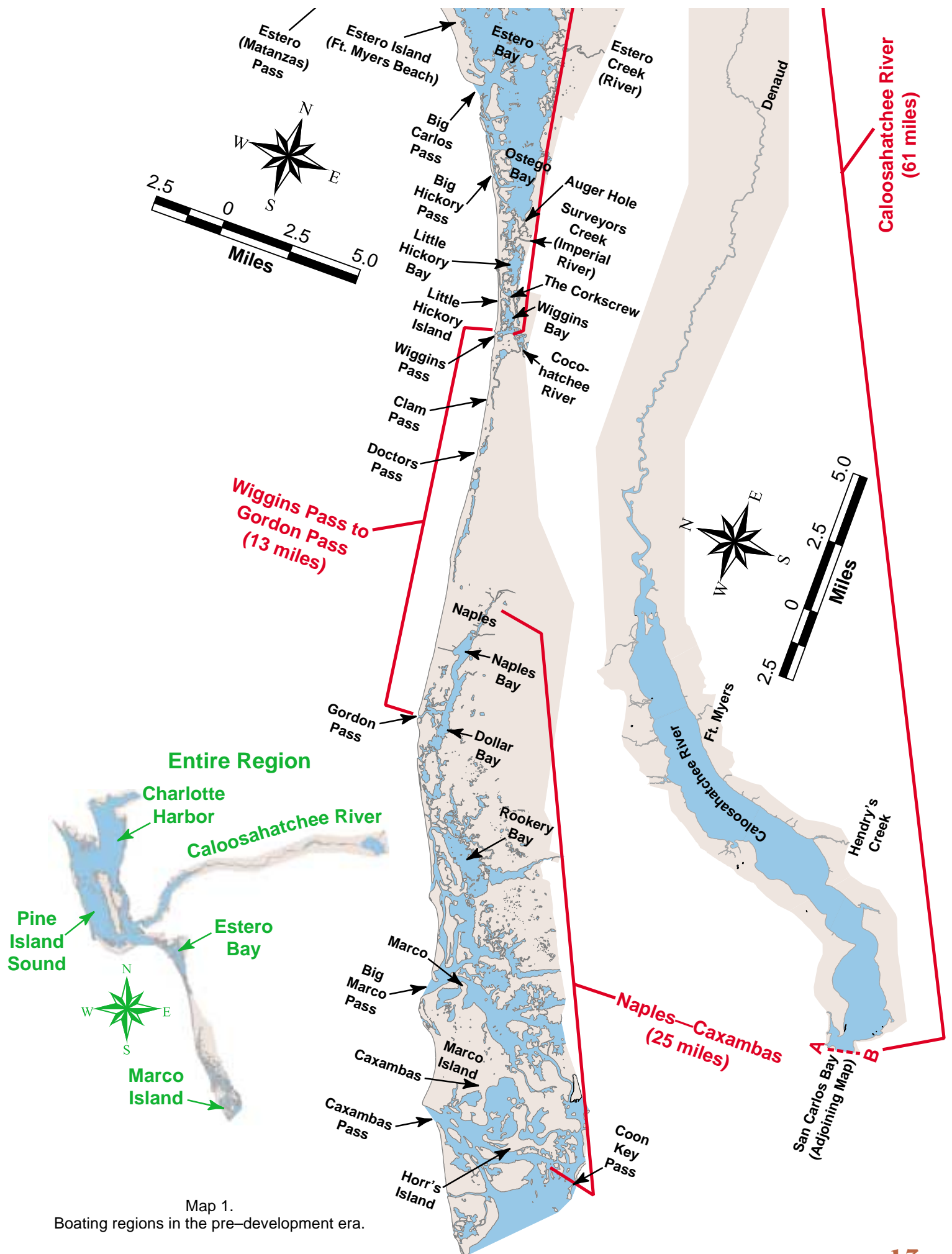
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The Boating Geography of Southwest Florida Before Coastal Development

One must return to the late 19th century to visualize the pre-development condition of the waterways in Southwest Florida from Placida Harbor to Marco Island and the Caloosahatchee. This region included three separate inland bays, a reach along the Gulf of Mexico shore, and a river system (Map 1):

- On the north, Gasparilla Sound to San Carlos Bay, 45 miles along the Gulf shoreline, including elbow-shaped Charlotte Harbor, Pine Island Sound, and Metlochatch Sound (Matlacha Pass);
- In the middle, Estero Bay, 17 miles long, from Estero (Matanzas) Pass (Ft. Myers Beach) through channels of Surveyors Creek (Imperial River) to Wiggins Bay, the mouth of the Cocohatchee and Wiggins Pass;
- Gulf of Mexico, a 13-mile reach south from Wiggins Pass to Gordon Pass;
- To the south, Naples Bay to Marco and Caxambas, an inside waterway stretching 25 miles long;
- Caloosahatchee, from the river's mouth in San Carlos Bay, upstream and eastward, for 84 miles to the river's source in the sawgrass region of Lake Okeechobee.





Natural barriers historically separated these waterways. The connections from Gasparilla Sound and San Carlos Bay were impeded: north to Lemon Bay by “The Cut-Off,” east to the Caloosahatchee by the river’s delta, and south from San Carlos Bay to the Gulf of Mexico by inlet shoals. Mariners entering and leaving Estero Bay had to run Estero (Matanzas) Pass and Wiggins Pass, as well as negotiate the tortuous, winding channel connecting Estero and Wiggins Bays. There were no harbors of refuge, such as present-day Clam Pass and Doctors Pass, along the Gulf Coast. Farther south, beyond the entrance at Gordon Pass, the inside passage from Naples Bay to Marco was strewn with oyster bars that made navigation risky even for shallow-draft vessels. On the Caloosahatchee, waterfalls set the head of navigation at Ft. Thompson (La Belle). Settlers along this coast could sail along the Gulf shore in good weather, but strong onshore winds would force them inside, where passage was especially impeded when seasonal “northers” reduced the water depths and made many shoals impassable.

From the north, mariners entered Gasparilla Sound through Gasparilla Pass (6.5-foot depth), though shallow-draft coasters sometimes used Little Gasparilla (Boca

Nueva) Pass (3.5-foot depth) in settled weather. The sound, 9 miles long, varied in width from approximately a half mile in the north to 6 miles in the south (including Bull and Turtle Bays), where it connected with Charlotte Harbor. The principal channel south was between Devil Fish Key and Gasparilla Island (4.5 feet deep). Another shallower, crooked channel ran east between Devil Fish Key and Cayo Pelau. Charlotte Harbor, an extensive embayment with relatively uniform depths, opened to the south and stretched 10 miles east by 20 miles north. Vessels entered the harbor from the Gulf through Boca Grande Pass, which had a natural depth of 19 feet over the bar. East through the harbor, 9-foot depths could be carried to Punta Gorda. Pea’s Creek (also called Pease Creek and, later, the Peace River) emptied into Charlotte Harbor just north-east of Punta Gorda.

Vessels heading south, either from Boca Grande or Charlotte Harbor, coasted down Pine Island Sound, the 15-mile-long by 3- to 4-mile-wide passage of water situated between Pine Island and the barrier island chain of La Costa, Captiva, and Sanibel Islands. Shoals existed opposite Boca Captiva (Captiva Pass) and Boca Ciega (Blind Pass). In fair weather, fishing schooners used either pass. Vessels touched at a fishing station on the northeast coast of Captiva Island. In 1880, Boca Ciega was not “blind” (closed), but had a 400-foot-wide channel. A side channel veered north between Buck and Captiva Islands, with depths from 3 to 6 feet all the way out to the sound. Along the inside passage heading south in Pine Island Sound, and after the shoals opposite Blind Pass, deep water opened into San Carlos Bay, and the channel skirted the east shore of Sanibel Island south to the Gulf of Mexico.

Numerous islands fringed Metlochat Sound (Matlacha Pass), separating Pine Island from the mainland to the east. The channel through Middle Metlochat was tortuous and impassable for vessels of more than 2-foot draft. Upper and Lower Metlochat Sound were relatively less obstructed by islands and afforded deeper water, accommodating vessels drawing 6 to 7 feet. Pine Island and Metlochat Sounds joined at the south in San Carlos Bay. An extensive tidal delta at the mouth of the Caloosahatchee shoaled the east portion of San Carlos Bay.



Estero River during the Koreshan settlement era, circa 1900.



Cuban fishing smacks sailing in Charlotte Harbor, 1922.



Imperial River, early 1900.



Coastal view of Marco Island, early 1900.



Orange River, early 1900.

Estero Bay, which trends northwest/southeast and is approximately 7 miles long and 2 miles wide at its center, tapers at each end. Mariners entered at the north through Estero Pass (Matanzas Pass). The bay was bounded on the west by Estero, Big Hickory, and Little Hickory Islands. Though Big Carlos Pass retains its historic position and shape today, the other inlets situated south of it were very differently shaped in earlier eras. (The Inlet Dynamics chapter explains the effects of human intervention and natural processes on the history of these inlets.) Numerous islands of various sizes are scattered throughout the bay. A long sand bar covered with 6 to 12 inches of water at mean low water restricted vessels at the mouth of Estero Creek. Another sand bar was at the mouth of Surveyors Creek (Imperial River), with approximately 1 foot of water at mean low tide. Estero Bay ended at the Auger Hole, a tortuous distributary channel at the mouth of Surveyors Creek, a little south of Big Hickory Pass. Vessels transiting south had to negotiate this constriction and pass into Surveyors Creek, then down that creek through the Cork Screw, another sharply bending channel of shallow water, before entering Little Hickory Bay, a distance of 4 miles, in order to reach the Cocohatchee and Wiggins Pass.

The Gulf shore south of San Carlos Bay (Ft. Myers Beach) was sparsely populated in predevelopment times. This was especially true of the 13-mile stretch of coastline between Wiggins and Gordon Pass. Naples Bay could be approached through Gordon Pass, but there was only a fish camp at the inlet mouth in the early 1900s. An inside waterway connected this pass to Naples and extended south for 12 miles to Big Marco Pass. The passage was a few hundred feet to 1 mile distant from the Gulf beach, from 40 feet to one-half-mile wide, and from 3 to 10 feet deep. Many transverse oyster bars, covered by a dense growth of mangroves, obstructed the passage. About 3 miles south of Naples was Dollar Bay, a wider section of this waterway, and Rookery Bay, another enlarged section, lay another 4 miles south. Fishermen used tidal channels to run east of Marco Island and round Coon Key Pass, a distance of 13 miles, to reach Caxambas.



The banks along the Caloosahatchee were lined with rickety docks, sewer outfall pipes and litter before the turn of the century. In 1888, the Ft. Myers Council ordered outhouses on the waterfront removed as they were "offensive to the best interest of the community."

The Caloosahatchee, early in the 19th century, was recognized as the key to settling the vast Okeechobee Basin. Unlike today, the river did not reach the big lake. An extensive shoal (5.5 foot depth), across the mouth where the river entered San Carlos Bay between Sword Point and Punta Rosa (Rassa), hampered navigation. Other obstacles included numerous oyster bars along the 17-mile reach up to Ft. Myers and a very crooked, shallow (4 feet deep), and long (44 mile) channel from Ft. Myers to the waterfalls at Ft. Thompson (La Belle). The river's source was 4 miles upstream of Ft. Thompson near

Lake Flirt, which was 16 miles west of Lake Okeechobee. The Caloosahatchee above Ft. Myers was subject to overflow during the wet seasons. There are numerous recordings of 17-foot-high floods at Denaud; these recurring events prompted private ventures and government attempts to regulate river flow for land drainage and reclamation.

These were the general conditions that prevailed before changes were made, with navigation improvements and land drainage the principal goals behind the man-made alterations.



Caloosahatchee shoreline.



Bird's-eye view of Punta Gorda before seawall.

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Pig butchering on the bank of the Caloosahatchee in 1911.