

Good Day to all! Did you know that Charlotte Harbor, in addition to offering great fishing today, supported a booming fishing industry by the late 1500's, over 400 years ago? To place that in proper perspective, the English didn't settle Jamestown until 1607 and it was 1620 before the Pilgrims arrived at Plymouth.

Juan Ponce de Leon first entered the body of water that became Charlotte Harbor in May 1513, returning to the area in February 1521 to establish a Spanish colony. Soon after, ferociously attacked by local Calusa warriors, survivors returned to Havana, Cuba with a mortally wounded Ponce de Leon.

Even so, by the late 16th century, a Cuban fishing industry flourished. In fact, the Spanish Captain-General in Havana wrote officials at Saint Augustine in 1598, asking that they visit the area to mediate a dispute between fishing interests. At the time, Spain controlled both Florida and Cuba. The Bishop of Cuba also utilized a fisherman to communicate with a Calusa chief in the area during the late 17th century.

Havana's population, around 3,000 folks by 1600, of mostly Spanish Catholics relied on a steady supply of seafood, particularly during the Lenten season. Cuba lacked an estuary consistently productive as Charlotte Harbor.

When England acquired Florida in 1763 after the Seven Years' War (French and Indian), Cuban fishermen were allowed to continue their activities. Some liked the coastal islands so much, they decided to settle there permanently. By 1769, Bernard Romans, who named Charlotte Harbor after Great Britain's Queen Charlotte, noted that plenty of fish were found in the harbor and estimated that 2 million pounds of dried salted fish were shipped to Havana annually from Florida's west coast. Cuban fishing ranchos were located at Useppa, Cayo Costa, Gasparilla, Sanibel, Punta Rassa, and other sites.

Ranchos still existed on Charlotte Harbor when the railroad came to Trabue (Punta Gorda) in 1886. One, on the north end of Cayo Costa, was established by Tariva Padilla, better known as "Captain Pappy," in the 1870's. However, concentrating on dried, salted fish, they were soon replaced by experienced fisherman from coastal North Carolina, who began shipping fresh fish north, packed in ice.

I was fortunate to grow up in the Charlotte Harbor community just down the street from Captain Pappy's daughter, Lola Willis, (Miss Lola), likely in her 70's at the time. What a great lady! She and her husband Tom lived in a cabin with no running water or electricity. I still remember gathering eggs for her, along with wood for her stove, rain barrels by the front porch, and kerosene lanterns. Captain Pappy has descendants residing in Charlotte County today.

Check out History Services' yearlong project, "Telling Your Stories: History in the Parks". It began in January 2021 with placement of the first interpretive sign "Charlotte Harbor Spa" at South County Regional Park. The last was dedicated December 15, 2021 at Centennial Park featuring Florida postcards. All dedicated signs can be viewed at online library resources. Select "Programs and Services", then "History Services" and "Virtual Programs". Visit the same site and select "History Exhibits" to find out what history related programs and videos are available.

"Did You Know" appears, typically, every other Wednesday in The Daily Sun newspaper and the Charlotte County Historical Society. The Society's mission is to advocate and support local history through education, initiatives, and projects in Charlotte County. We are also always looking for volunteers and interested individuals to serve as board members. If you believe our area's history is as important as we do, please visit Charlotte County Historical Center Society online, or call 941.769.1270 for more information.