

The Historical Quarterly of The St. Lucie Historical Society, Inc.

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Fall 2018

Peter P. Cobb's illustrious career inspired many stories

By Jean Ellen Wilson

Editor's note: SLHS board member Jean Ellen Wilson supervises the Adams-Cobb Cultural Center in downtown Fort Pierce. Here are some stories told about this area's longtime merchant and benefactor.

Everybody knew that **Peter P. Cobb**, proprietor of the most famous store on Florida's southeast coast, was in the habit of taking his breakfast at the Atlantic Hotel a few doors up the street. **William Rawlinson** certainly knew. On the morning of Jan. 30, 1907, this once-poor man who had acquired money by marrying an older rich widow was prowling outside the restaurant waiting for the storekeeper to appear. Rawlinson was armed with the weapon and the will to murder Cobb but somehow missed his original target, so went down the street and mortally wounded **C.T. McCarty** as that prominent lawyer was coming out of the barber shop. The motive: Rawlinson was enraged when a profitable real estate deal fell through because, in part, Cobb held a note on the property. The less culpable McCarty was the agent for the sale.

Rawlinson might well have been the only one in town who thought ill of Peter P. Cobb.

Walter Hellier remembered: "Mr. Cobb was an outstanding citizen and earned the respect and friendship of a great many people. He extended credit where it was necessary and never dunned folks to pay up ... Mr. Cobb was noted for his willingness to help anyone in distress and was generous in his donations to civic projects."

Charles Gifford also remembered Mr. Cobb as being like another generous man of his acquaintance: "They were two men who never turned you down if you were broke or stranded."

The local representative of the Star newspaper

once reported: "Mr. P. P. Cobb has a very large stock on hand and his store is full of customers from morning till night; his display of Christmas goods, hardware, dry goods and groceries is greater than ever, and his courtesy is what it has been for the last thirteen years your correspondent has known him—just perfect."



Mr. Cobb was a respected and contributing citizen: In 1898, he was named postmaster and an election official; in 1899, he was active with the local committee for good roads; in February of 1901 he was one of original aldermen when the city incorporated.

Controversy was anathema to the "genial" P. P. Cobb.

One example of his determination to avoid confrontation was the story told about a farmer who brought in some overripe cucumbers and insisted that Cobb purchase them. "What do you think they are worth?" the storekeeper finally asked. "Two dollars a bushel," was the reply. Cobb agreed to give him \$1.50 in trade and when the deal was struck took the bucket out on the dock and dumped the cukes into the river.

Peter Cobb and his friend **Milton Card** hailed from Cazenovia, N.Y. and owned adjacent pineapple plantations down the river. When Cobb gave up the pineapple business and went to storekeeping, they divided up all the equipment, etc. they owned together. All went swimmingly except there was disagreement as to who was to buy out whom for the boat they shared. After a time, Cobb settled the matter by sawing the vessel in two and taking his half away.

Card had decided to live under his own vine and fig tree on the Indian River when he had discovered its merits on a hunting and fishing trip in 1874. He

Welcome - New Members

Sue Favorite, Membership Chairman

Jimmy & Courtney Sellers • Harry Hungerford
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Contributions

Memorials

Catherine Browning

Paul & Jo Ann Berg

Sandra Byal Strickland

Mose Sanders
Nancy Bennett

Special Contribution

Dr. Maxwell King
Jack & Sally Chapman

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The President's Message

by Nancy Bennett

Greetings everyone, and welcome back to all of our vacationers. Summer is over and it's time to start planning for the Historical Society's best year ever. **Sophie Ebner** has done a wonderful job organizing and cataloging the museum's library. You are welcome to visit it to do any research here with the materials we have available.

We are looking forward to an exciting year ahead. Thank you to **Sally and Jack Chapman** for your wonderful gift to the Historical Society. It was greatly appreciated. **Robyn Hutchinson** has a great lineup of speakers for our dinner meetings. Meetings are still at the Elks Lodge on 5th Street. We are celebrating Halloween with the Aquarium again this year. The adults seem to enjoy it as much as the kids. We will have a Treasure Hunt with prizes for successful hunters. We will participate in the annual Sights and Sounds parade. As always, we welcome everyone to volunteer.

If you have an interest in any project or an idea for a new project, please share it with us. The society can't exist without you and your support. Let's all work together to make this the best year yet. Δ

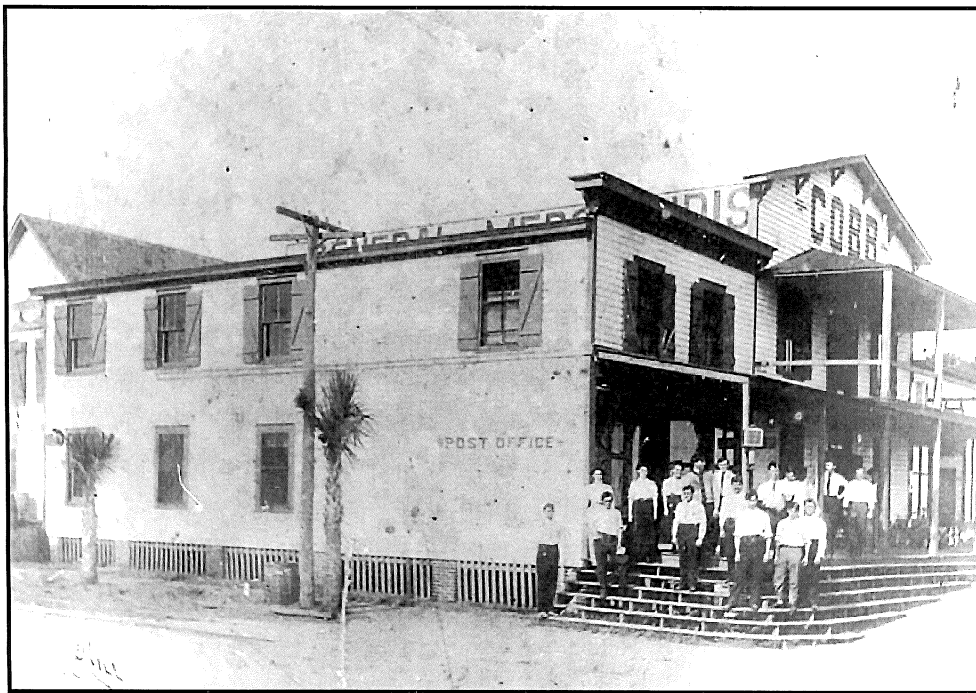
Florida Fact

The famed warship USS Constitution was built from Florida live oak trees grown near Pensacola. She gained the nickname "Old Ironsides" because enemy cannonballs bounced off her tough hull during the War of 1812. (*The Florida Handbook*)



Florida fact: Florida was admitted to the union as the 27th state on March 23, 1845. President John Tyler signed the act of admission. Some in Congress had argued that the Florida Territory should be split and admitted as two states.

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presumably from lumber brought down on Captain Hogg's boat. They laid out some lots and called the place Cantown from their intention to can oysters and pineapple. Peter Cobb became their manager and when their venture failed, he took over the operation when a receiver was appointed in September 1899. It was not until Jan. 2, 1904 that the court released the deed to the property to Cobb the new owner.

The store supplied "Everything to Eat, Wear, and Use" to the ever increasing influx of settlers, traded knives and pots for deerskins brought in by the Seminoles, sold salt and flour to the families pasturing cattle to the west and became a famous merchandise destination for traders and customers up and down the river.

The storefront, the dock that stretched far out into the river, the gazebo on the store's southern approach, became the town center and the gathering place for celebrations, band concerts, and political speeches. Among the famous who tied up to the dock were **John Wanamaker** of the Philadelphia store and **Gene Austin** in his yacht Blue Heaven.

Cobb's store had its Great Quitting Business Sale in 1931 and later the building was sold to **Buddy Pitts**. Pitts Furniture and Gas became a Fort Pierce institution. When its time had come, **David Cleveland** bought and restored it. Today it is owned by Adams Ranch.

The space that now houses the **Bud Adams** Gallery, where the history of Indian Riverland is told in vintage photographs, was once the apartment of Buddy Pitts' two sisters who kept books for the business.

Buddy's daughter **Deborah**, when a youngster, remembers her aunts talking about encountering Mr. Cobb's ghost from time to time. Once, Deborah was in the office when an oversize ledger, sitting securely on a file cabinet, suddenly fell to the floor with a loud bang.

"Oh, that's quite enough Mr. Cobb," scolded one of the aunts in exasperation. Δ

Cannon from 1715 fleet found near Fort Pierce

A salvage crew has recovered a cannon from Spain's ill-fated 1715 treasure fleet. Salvors raised the cannon from the ocean bottom a few miles northeast of the Fort Pierce seaport on Aug. 13, according to a report in the St. Lucie News Tribune.

Capt. John Brandon, leader of the salvage operation, discussed the 1715 fleet last year as guest speaker for a St. Lucie Historical Society meeting. Spain sorely needed the income from the fleets, laden with valuables, that sailed homeward from the Caribbean each year. The loss of the entire 1715 fleet in a hurricane was a crippling blow to Spanish finances.

Following a painstaking restoration process, the cannon reportedly will be displayed along the waterfront in downtown Fort Pierce. Δ

Florida Fact

On Jan. 7, 1911 film and stage actress Thelma "Butterfly" McQueen was born in Tampa. She gained fame in the role of Prissy in the 1939 classic movie "Gone With the Wind."

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built a fine house of yellow brick down the Drive which still stands. Cobb's house in town was moved, with considerable trouble and expense, to the Regional History Center to educate visitors as to how the pioneers lived. Unfortunately, it was destroyed by arson before it could be renovated at the new site and the Register-Gardner house was later donated in its place.

Hazel Woolard remembered Cobb's Store as an institution: "This big building with a porch across the East side, facing the river and Cobb's dock. This building housed the post office, grocery store, domestics and ready-to-wear. The outside doors to the ready-to-wear were always kept closed as the breeze from the river would blow over the displays so everyone went in the grocery store through a big archway into this part of the store. Mr. Cobb had a slogan which was painted on the outside of the store "Everything to eat, wear and use." On Saturday night this was the meeting place of the people who had not seen each other since the previous Saturday night."

Several men including **Pierre VanLandingham** and **Charles Croghan** remembered swinging on the iron posts on the edge of the Cobb's store porch. Croghan wrote: "My sister and I used to swing 'round the posts, tossing our bodies in midair over the sidewalk, some three feet below, while our parents shopped. Inside, near the store's entry, behind a counter stood Mr. Cobb, dressed in dark trousers covered by a white apron, white shirt with celluloid collar and a black knit tie. Besides ringing up purchases, collecting money, and packaging goods, he dispensed candy, usually peppermint sticks to the patrons' kids."

Tommy Taylor (Oh, do we miss that dear man) told about how he went with his mother to the bank one day and another boy who was playing in the street said: "If we go over to Cobb's and stand around so Mr. Cobb can see us, we'll get a piece of candy." Tommy, tempted by the rare treat of a sweet, agreed and they accomplished their purpose. Tommy, however, could not enjoy his, wracked as he was by guilt by the subterfuge.

In 1887, a group of New Haven, Conn. investors purchased what would eventually become the Cobb building from **Ben** and **Annie Hogg** who had built it

... continued on page 4

Cobb career highlights

1885 Peter P. Cobb arrived in Fort Pierce.

1897 Took over operation of the store, expanded stock of groceries and grain to include dry goods and clothing. Sold his pineapple farm.

1898 Named postmaster, established post office with the name "Fort Pierce" in his store.

1899 Served on the committee for good roads.

1901 In January installed a windmill. On Feb. 2, P. P. Cobb one of original alderman when city incorporated. By April operated delivery wagon.

1902 In October, a two-story building was added wherein fine furniture was sold, "the grandest ever seen in this section."

1903 In September a gale demolished the store's windmill.

1904 Bonded to carry a gun.

1905 Cobb's Store float received first prize in the parade celebrating July 4. In August, Mr. Cobb added a bathroom to his residence

1918 Nov. 11, an impromptu parade celebrating the World War One armistice ended up in front of Cobb's Store.

1919 Late July, patrol boat Marguerite with its mounted rifle and crew trained to catch booze runners is docked in front of the store.

1921 A fire on Cobb's dock illuminates the store and surrounding waterfront. The building on the south side of the dock owned by Peter Cobb and occupied by the Walter Peterson Fish Co. was destroyed.

1923 Cobb's store employs a milliner and a manager of the ladies department

1925 November, two Curtiss seaplanes stopped to refuel in front of Cobb's store. December, police raided Cobb's dock, arrested five men for bootlegging. The liquor was hidden underwater.

1927 Nov. 25 editorial: "An Honored Pioneer P. P. Cobb."

1928 September, Cobb's dock, built 40 years earlier, with all its buildings, demolished by hurricane.

1931 Cobb's "Great Going Out of Business Sale"

History Center to receive \$1,000 education grant

The Florida Council for Social Studies, a statewide education group, has awarded a \$1,000 grant to the St. Lucie County Regional History Center, in support of the center's education programs. SLHS member and volunteer **Jamie Colborn** prepared the grant application. A letter from **Kristine Scola**, the group's endowment chairperson, indicates this year's Historical Preservation Award, plus the grant, will be formally presented during an Orlando conference in October.

The history center, which annually hosts hundreds of visiting schoolchildren, uses the grant funds to provide study materials. This is the third year the local museum has received such an award. Δ

Feedback

Here are some recent visitors' comments about the St. Lucie County Regional History Center, compiled from the guest book:

Meg & Diane Price, Asheville, N.C.: "Love it! Thank you."

Gary & Kathy Zielinke, Clewiston: "Wonderful smaller museum. Surprised at so much stuff."

Jason Ryan, Fort Pierce: "Love all the local history."

Monte & Marsha Wenzel, Terre Haute, Ind.: "Great Museum, very informative."

Chris Stank, Valdosta, Ga: "Absolutely fantastic."

Wasuer Family, Germany: "Very nice place, all the old things..."

Cindi Allen, Ogallala, Neb.: "So worth the time to take a look."

Steve & Cathy Wheeler, West Palm Beach: "Great history –awesome."

Kent Dembry, Plano, Ill.: "This added a lot of fun to my mini-vacation." Δ

Florida Fact

Cecil Farris Bryant, the state's 34th governor, was born in Marion County on July 26, 1916.

Remembrances

Sandra "Sandy" Strickland

A longtime member of our society, **Sandra Lois Byal Strickland**, died June 15 following several years of declining health. Sandy Strickland was born Nov. 28, 1942 in Richmond, Va. She came to Fort Pierce as a child and was a 1960 graduate of Dan McCarty High School.

Following a career at the St. Lucie County Clerk's office, Sandy Strickland became an enthusiastic member of the St. Lucie Historical Society. She and her husband **Adrian Strickland** were instrumental in helping to reopen the Regional History Center in 2010. She helped in many Historical Society activities and, until her health worsened, regularly attended monthly dinner meetings.

Thomas "Tommy" Taylor

A Fort Pierce native and lifelong local resident, **Thomas O. Taylor** died June 5 after a brief illness. His long life of service to his community and country earned him many admirers. Tommy Taylor was a U.S. Army veteran of World War Two. He then served more than two decades in the local National Guard unit. He was awarded the Army's Distinguished Service Medal for rescuing victims of the 1949 hurricane that struck this area.

Tommy Taylor operated a mechanical and electrical business in Fort Pierce, and taught auto mechanics at Central High School. A man of many interests and skills, he also earned a tugboat captain's license. He was an enthusiastic supporter of the Historical Society and generous in sharing his hometown memories.

Mary Louise Lloyd King

Mary Louise Lloyd King, who grew up in Fort Pierce and retained a lifelong attachment to the community, died June 9 in her Virginia home, at age 83. She was a 1952 graduate of Fort Pierce High School and attended Auburn University. She was married to **Dr. Charles R. King**, a St. Lucie County man who became a prominent educator and president of Southwest Virginia Community College.

Though residing in Virginia, Mary Louise King never lost touch with her St. Lucie County friends and neighbors, and returned here frequently through the years. Δ

St. Lucie Historical Society, Inc.
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St. Lucie Historical Society, Inc.

Please join us in preserving our local heritage for future generations.

Name _____

Spouse's Name _____

Names and ages of minor children:

Address _____

City/State/Zip _____

Home Telephone _____

Business Telephone _____

Cell _____

Email _____

I/We wish to join the Society at the level indicated below.
Membership is from September through August.

New Renewal Individual (\$20.00)

Family (\$25.00) Business (\$50.00)

Please make checks payable to:

St. Lucie Historical Society, Inc
P O Box 578

Fort Pierce, Florida 34954-0578

For Information telephone: (772) 461-8020

General Meeting are held at:

**The Elks Lodge
635 South 5th Street
Fort Pierce, Florida 34950**

Society General Meetings are held on the 3rd Thursday of the month, from September through May. A meal is provided before the meeting at the price of \$12.00 per person. Reservations must be made for these meals no later than two days in advance of the meeting. To make reservations telephone (772) 461-8020 and leave a message. Reservations and your RSVP information by e-mail to: dinner@stluciehistoricalsociety.net. Dinner begins at 5:30 P.M. and the General Meeting Starts at 6:00 P.M.

Volunteers are Needed

If you have 3 1/2 hours that you can give once a week either in the morning or afternoon, please consider volunteering at the Museum.

Admission, to the museum, for St. Lucie Historical Society members is **FREE**. So come and take a tour.

The latest exhibit is St Lucie Families-Crafters of Local History.

The Pineapple Patch Gift Shop has a large selection of books of Florida historical value, cards, handmade Seminole Indian dolls, and baubles made by volunteers.

Museum Hours:

Wednesday-Saturday, 10 am to 4 pm. Sunday, 1 pm-4 pm