

Coming to Florida for Ages

By Diane Barile, Vice Chairman of the Historical Society

From the Ice Age until today, reasons for being in Florida have varied from keeping warm, finding food, running away, getting away, starting over, pioneering, speculating, shooting rockets, retiring in the sun with lower taxes. Just as waves on the Atlantic shoreline are pulled by the wind and moon, a tide of people marked their story on the landscape, culture, nationality, and economics of the place.

In the coming months, we shall follow the various incursions of people who have come, disappeared, and those who survived.

During the Ice Age, the beach was some thirty miles east of where you see it today and temperatures much cooler. Water was scarce—no St. Johns River or sufficient water below ground to support a large population. Family clans hunted mastadons, then small animals, when the elephants disappeared. These ancient souls sustained their lives only on the limited resources of the temporary environment.

Ten thousand years ago, world temperatures rose, melting the glaciers covering much of the earth. What you know as the Indian River lagoon today received water 6,000

years ago from the land and sea. Mysteriously, the ancient people disappeared.

New, genetically distinct native nations developed throughout the Florida peninsula. Along our lagoon region—three distinct, interrelated tribes, the Ais, Jeagas, and Tequesta controlled the seashore, barrier island, and St. John's River. The Ais along the lagoon had no need for agriculture. They lived off of the fish, wild game, and plants of the lagoon, freshwater creeks, and the St. John's River.

These are the people Columbus called Indians. He was really lost. His thinking may have been, "Isabella, this must be India—I saw Indians!" The Spanish, for centuries, described the native warriors as dangerously ferocious. But these folks were no match for the hurricane of what the invading Spanish called 'colonization.'

The Spanish were in a pitched, competitive battle for what Europeans called the "New World." This was really very old world and was "new" only to the newcomers. Few Spanish installations were established or sporadically

COMING TO FLORIDA FOR AGES continued on pg 54

COMING TO FLORIDA FOR AGES continued from pg 44

occupied. But with advanced technology and disastrous diseases, the Florida tribes dwindled, and much of our region became devoid of people. After 250 years of settlement, Florida was turned over to England after the French and Indian War. Departing ships carried the few remaining "Indians" as the Spanish sailed for Cuba.

Florida shores received but a gentle tap from the English for only twenty years, from 1763-1783. In East Florida, organized investors from London established plantations for indigo, cotton, sugar, and sour oranges. None, however, could ever be compared to the East India Company. Before the American Revolution, England had 14 American colonies. Florida was the only one not to seek independence from the English King George. Saint Augustine was a haven for what the English called "Loyalists" and the Americans called "Tories." Loyalists streamed south from the rebellious colonies with their families, slaves, and other belongings.

As a result of the revolution (1783), Florida returned to Spanish jurisdiction. Desperate for new settlers, the governor issued large land grants to people of several nationalities: English, Spanish, Swiss, and French. Even one of Napoleon's nephews, a Prince, moved just outside of Saint Augustine. Along the lagoon, the Delépine and Fleming land grants established ownership of thousands of acres, but improvements were never made.

The persistent waves of land-hungry Americans from the north eroded any defense possible by the poorly manned, diminished economy and power of Spain. Andrew Jackson even invaded Spanish Florida chasing the once comfortably settled Native Americans further south from Tallahassee and Gainesville.

To settle international debts, Spain ceded Florida to the United States. First, as a US territory in 1821, Florida became a State in 1841. This "great leap" to American statehood grew from a European colony to part of the new American nation. The story of Florida as part of the United States of America is the topic for next month.

- To see what's known as the pre-Columbian people and the mastadons, take some time to visit the Brevard Museum of History and Natural Science in Cocoa.
- To look at Spanish treasures found on our coast, visit the McLarty Treasure Museum just South of the Sebastian Inlet.

The South Brevard Historical Society invites you to our monthly meetings, the second Saturday of each month, from 3:00 to 5:00 p.m. at the Melbourne Public Library on Fee Ave. ☺