

## The Birth of a Settlement - Palmetto Point



The British had acquired Florida from the Spanish in 1763. Although they occupied Florida for only twenty-one years they left a lasting imprint on Volusia County. To encourage demographic and economic growth the British quickly invalidated Spanish land claims and instituted a liberal land policy, which by 1776 amounted to 114 grants totaling 1.4 million acres. They also introduced the plantation system, with its dependency on slave labor. Holly Hill was a part of the Turnbull grant. Florida returned to Spanish control in 1783. The new Spanish government required all settlers to take an oath of allegiance to the Spanish crown or sell their property to Spain. Most settlers elected to leave and the territory returned to wilderness. The Spanish then offered land grants to Englishmen and Scotsmen on the condition that they plant and cultivate the lands.

William Wallace Ross arrived here sometime in the 1860's and established a home site at a point which he called 'Palmetto Point'. There he established the first Holly Hill area post office at his home which was called the Palmetto Post Office. Records of the Post Office Department in the National Archives confirm a Post Office, was established at Palmetto Point on July 21, 1868, with Samuel P. Wimple appointed postmaster. It was discontinued on July 12, 1870. This date is collaborated with other information that is known of them.

Ross was the brother of Edmund G. Ross who, was a U.S. Senator from Kansas. Tax rolls for 1869 show Ross had 200 acres of orange trees valued at \$600 He owned the grove jointly with his brother in law Wimple. Abilene, Kansas records say Wimple started the grove and a sugar plantation in Florida in 1868. Ross then invested in the grove. When Mathis Day, founder of Daytona Beach, arrived here in May 1870, he spotted the Wimple and Ross grove behind a growth of Palmettos on the west bank of the Halifax River. This information is obtained from Day's diary.

Ross and Wimple did not stay here too long. A freeze in the very early 1870's wrecked their orange crop and the pioneers returned north.

There is no record of what happened to the Ross cabin but through the years it disappeared. In 1904 the Mabbette family lived to the west just across the road ( Riverside Drive) and it became know as 'Mabbette Point'. On February 26, 1958 the Holly Hill Council officially named the point ' Ross Point Park' in honor of Ross and a marker was placed there preserving its importance in the cities history.

William Samuel Flemming Sr. meanwhile had not given up on the area. The land owner was born in Holywood (pronounced Hollywood), County Down on the coast of North Ireland near Belfast. In the summer of 1876 Fleming went to Philadelphia with the express purpose of influencing settlers to come to Florida. He got the promise of fifteen families. Among the families were the Wetherell's and the Simcoe's.

Mr. Wetherell was born on October 30, 1846. He and his wife, Margaret, were both born in Durham, England and now had four children: Tom, the eldest, Charles, William and a baby girl of a few months.

William Wetherell first came to America in 1866 to work in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, on the preparations for the big Centennial celebration. He had left his bride behind in northern England, while he grabbed the opportunity to earn more in this country. He received a job working on the Continental Building. In 1868 he returned to England, but he was already making plans for a permanent move to the United States. In 1872, the family sailed into New York, settled close to Pittsburgh, and later moved to Philadelphia. It was there that Wetherell met William Simcoe, a friend from his earlier days in the city. Mr. Simcoe heard that Miami was beautiful and because of the climate it offered a chance for tremendous growth and work. He was able to convince the Wetherell family that Miami was the place to be.

Two other families Flemming influenced were the Monroe's and the Wood's neither of who had any children. It is notable that New Port News, Virginia was settled by the Irish in 1621 and the Monroe's were quite probably of the same Virginia family tree as James Monroe, the 5th U.S. president.

William Samuel Fleming Sr. in 1876 owned most of the land now comprising Holly Hill and his land holdings continued from there south through Port Orange, where he and his wife Mary lived. In 1877 he owned 4,000 acres on the Halifax River between Ormond and the recently settled site of Daytona and began to erect a simple frame dwelling on a portion of his riverfront property.

The Wetherell family left Philadelphia in middle September of 1876 in a small schooner and sailed to Fernandina, where the schooner Alagnolia was to pick them up there but it ran aground in Ponce Inlet, The Monroe's and the 'Wood's from Virginia joined them there. They

were stranded in Fernandina at the far Northeast tip of Florida for three weeks until Captain Charlie Fossard who ran a freight and passenger schooner between Daytona and Fernandina arrived and the families got passage on his boat, the Frank Stone, to complete the trip. A storm forced them ashore at Ponce Inlet on October 15 th. Fortunately for Holly Hill they never completed the trip to Miami. Thomas Wetherell, 9 years old at the time, wrote an account of their arrival in Daytona years later. The Frank Stone brought them safely through the inlet but they saw the remains of the unfortunate Magnolia being torn apart by the surf. They landed in Daytona on October 17, 1876.

At that time this part of Florida was practically a wilderness. There was no railroad closer than Jacksonville. Mail was brought in about once a week on horse back from Enterprise, the County seat of Volusia. The Post Office was a dry goods box that sat in the corner of William Jackson's small store at the south end of Daytona.

The Wetherell's spent that first fall and winter at Daytona Beach in the woods in an old house at what then was the northeast corner of Ridgewood and Volusia Avenue now known as International Speedway Blvd (US1 and 92). But in the spring Flemming got them to move to Holly Hill where they bought from him the 220 feet on Washington Avenue, now LPGA Blvd. between Daytona Ave. and Dixie Highway for the sum of \$75. Their first home there was a one-room shack they built of driftwood found along the river and palmetto fans. Tragedy hit the Wetherell's when their fourth child, the baby girl died very young but two more girls were born to them in Holly Hill, Ethel and Victoria.

The Monroe's were the only other family settling directly in Holly Hill at that time, living in a cottage at the site of the old city hall where the jail is now located.

Dependent on boats for their supply of groceries, these families experienced frequent food shortages during periods of stormy weather. Though fish, oysters and wild game were abundant, women and children often dug for coontie roots, which they grated and baked into pancakes to use in the place of bread. For drinking water they dug a hole in a low spot of ground and drank this surface water. The wells were sometimes visited at night by wild animals. One evening Mrs. Wetherell was startled by a noise at the well and looking out saw a big black bear down on his haunches trying to get a drink. The oldest boy was chased by a large panther on what is now Daytona Avenue. It pursued him to the gate and even attempted to jump the picket fence after him. Another time Mrs. Wetherell was nearly paralyzed with fear when on going to the bed for the baby, she found a six foot black snake coiled up in the bed beside it.

Holly Hill at that time had no name and in discussion among the settlers Mrs. Monroe would like to have had it named New Port News, after her old home. This was a popular way of naming towns at this time as Ormond Beach was originally named New Britain after the Connecticut hometown of many of the early settlers there. In the discussions among the settlers however they decided that as 'Mr. Flemming owned nearly all the land and was the colony founder he

should have the naming privilege despite the fact that he still lived in Port Orange. Mr. Flemming decided to name the colony Holly Hill in memory of his Irish Hollywood home because there were lots of holly in the area and there was a bit of a rise in the terrain. One can easily see the similarity between the two areas in old photos.

Mr. Flemming began building a simple frame dwelling on a portion of his riverfront property. The land was cleared just south of the Holly Hill Canal right on the river shore. Unfortunately he died in 1878 before construction was completed. His son, Samuel Flemming Jr. who then took charge of his activities never carried the building plans further and continued in the large house they occupied in Port Orange which eventually burned down in the late 1970's.

After a few years both the Monroe's and the Woods left Holly Hill to return to Newport News. The Wetherell's however remained in the same location for 51 years. Mr. Wetherell died here on March 20, 1922. He gave time and money, the latter of which was not plentiful to anyone in the colony, to developing the town. He was foreman on the first canal dug through Holly Hill. It was started in 1880 and took about two years, as all had to be done by hand.

The Carters and Harris families became an important part of the settlement area in the late 1870's. Events were moving swiftly along the Halifax in 1876 when Daytona was incorporated by its 26 leading citizens. People were coming in by sea or overland from the St. John's River. Bishop Young of the Episcopal Diocese of Florida was ready to establish the church in this area.

The oldest home still standing in Holly Hill was built in 1878. Its existence provided many varied and interesting stories to the history of Volusia County.

Dr. William Hyde Carter, then of Passaic, NJ, desiring to seek a better climate, came to Florida in 1877. He was interviewed by Bishop Young and invited to establish a mission. He returned again with his family and Reverend H. B. Stuart-Martin in May via the St. John's, arriving at Daytona May 15, 1877. The first service in Daytona was on May 25<sup>th</sup>. His field was from New Britain ( Ormond Beach) to present day Titusville. The family was housed in Port Orange since there was no housing in Daytona available.

On January 14<sup>th</sup> 1878, Mrs. William Flemming, who was newly a widow, gave Dr. Carter the two lots south of his home site. Dr. Carter had already received his home site from Mr. Flemming. These two lots were for the expected church and rectory.

Later 'The Little Church in the Wildwood' was erected by the Bishop at the back of the corner lot on Connecticut Ave (now 9th Street). A service was held there once yearly so the Diocese could preserve the title to the property.

Dr. Carter's daughter Allie Harris shared his diary in 1941. It states:

'January 14, 1878. ordered lumber for the house.

March 19. started fence. April 4, 1878. steamer Agnes wrecked at the

Inlet.

July 28. .worked on house, finished the weatherboarding.

December 28, 'work began on the orange grove, William Wetherell assisting. The trees came from Port Orange and City Point. 94 in all.

There is little further mention of the house. Dr. Carter was assigned to St. Johns Church. Tallahassee in 1879 and served there until his death about 1908.

Mrs. Carter, her daughter Allie and two sons remained in the home and Mrs. Carter became the Holly Hill postmistress and held the post from October 29, 1877 for 30 years. An old photograph shows the path from the walk around the south of the house to the little Post Office between the two-story house front and the kitchen. It can be speculated that the six years between William Ross and Mrs. Carters' posts were the years Charles Wetherell had served as postmaster.

Mrs. Carter died at the home in 1910 left the house and grove to her eldest son William W. Carter who died in 1960. William Carter had printed the Halifax Journal from its beginning in 1884. Arthur Carter was a Journal reporter. William was the owner briefly toward its last days. Since his wife, Clara Mitchell, died in 1934 he left the house and grove to Allie Carter-Harris, wife of Charles A. Harris. She died in 1950 at the age of 96. The family was very active in Masonic circles.

There was one Carter descendent, Mrs. Zilpah Carter Cole, who inherited both the Carter and Harris homesteads. The old Carter home was sold by Mrs. Cole in 1952 to Dr. Benjamin H. Rawls. The house now has a brick facade and the dormer and old fence are gone. There was a huge pittosporum in front that probably came from Indiana where Dr. Stuart-Martin was born. His home to the north was called Fernbank while the Carter place was Magnolia Manor.

Charles Wetherell became active in civic affairs and built the first church and school in 1885 on the corner on the corner of Michigan (now 6<sup>th</sup> Street) and Daytona Avenue. The school still stands to this day. Before this time the only schooling the children received had been given by Reverend H. B. Stuart-Martin who out of concern and generosity taught the children on his own time and expense at his home. Tom and Charles Wetherell were two of his pupils. Mr. Will Harris was the first teacher of this school receiving \$30 a month. Victoria Wetherell attended this school with Josephine Hawley, who with her sister Frances Hawley lived at 427 2<sup>nd</sup> Street remembered that Victoria had the definite English accent of 'H' dropping.

Reverend Stuart-Martin, after several years in Palatka, returned to Volusia County and built the three early Episcopal churches in the county in 1883: All Saints in Enterprise, St. Barnabas in

DeLand and St. Mary's in Daytona Beach. In later years he homesteaded on Rlen1tt Island, but returned to Indiana before his death. The first artesian flow well of the area was dug by Mr. Maley and his father. This well was all dug by hand was put down in back of the Maley store on South Beach Street in Daytona. A second such well was later dug to be used for his saw mill.

Also around 1880 G.W. Harris established his grocery and general merchandise store on the banks of the Halifax River on what is now 8<sup>th</sup> Street and Riverside Drive. All merchandise was delivered by boat and many of their customers used the river for transportation.

Mr. Wetherell, no doubt remembering the dangers of ocean travel helped build the Ponce DeLeon Light House at Ponce Inlet. It is now on the National Register of Historic Places and is now the tallest lighthouse in America still standing in its original location. In 1934 his son Tom went to work for Sears Roebuck and Company and earned the fantastic salary of \$17.50 a week. He stayed with the company until he retired as manager of the Daytona Beach store. His marriage to Mildred Kent, which lasted for fifty-four years, produced two sons T. K and William. T. K served for many years in the Florida Legislature and was Speaker of the House from 1990-1992. His brother Billy is associated with the Daytona Beach Community College.

It was with great pleasure that Mrs. Wetherell on her 80<sup>th</sup> birthday, January 1<sup>st</sup>, 1927 recounted the family history in her latter days. She remarked that she would not want to go through the same experience again.

A big event in the lives of the settlers was when the first train came through from Jacksonville to Daytona in 1887, eleven years after the Wetherell's arrival. Nothing like the trains of today but an important welcome link connecting Daytona area with the outside world.

In the early 1880's as other settlers arrived Holly Hill's name began to gain in popularity. The settlement now had a church, school, post office, general store, sawmill and many homes. The slowly developing village had a population of about fifty, which did not significantly increase in the next several years.