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From Statehood to Citrus Citification, 1845-1904
by Carol Cortright and James Anthony Schnur
Chapter 2 in Largo's Centennial History

The end of the Second Seminole War (1835-1842) and the passage of the Armed Occupation Act of 1842 encouraged a handful of hardy settlers to move to the remote Pinellas Peninsula. Military campaigns during the 1830s and early 1840s had removed many Seminole Indians from the region. Thomas Hart Benton, a senator from Missouri, sponsored the Armed Occupation Act as a way to encourage settlement. Approved by Congress in August 1842, this legislation offered land grants throughout peninsular Florida to settlers who cultivated at least five acres, lived on their land, and agreed to fight Indians, if needed. Homesteaders who abided by the provisions of this landmark legislation received clear titles to their lands. Despite these generous land grants and Florida's increased political stability after the territory became a state in 1845, few settlers came to the region until the 1880s.

Those who did settle in the present-day Largo area spent much of their time tending crops, fishing, and hunting. They moored their small boats along a shoreline with unobstructed views of sunsets. They gazed into the Gulf of Mexico awaiting the next shipment of provisions. They felt the sting of mosquitoes while crushing sugar cane, herding livestock, or growing cotton. They also kept an eye on the skies: While languid days—filled with heat and humidity—slowed the pace of life, changes in the weather, especially tropical storms and hurricanes of the summer months, remained nearly impossible to predict in the years before improved technology and forecasting techniques. With simple cabins and log homes as shelters, even a strong afternoon thunderstorm

could leave families soaked or homeless, and thereby disrupt planting, harvesting, and other chores necessary for survival.

Larger storms unleashed their fury in ways that redrew the landscape and altered settlement patterns. For example, a monstrous hurricane known as the “Gale of 1848” eradicated what little existed in the way of “civilization” along the peninsula, including fishing camps at the southern tip of Pinellas Point established by Antonio Maximo Hernandez and William Bunce. This storm also flooded much of the Largo area and carved the Johns Pass inlet between Madeira Beach and Treasure Island.

Despite such conditions, pioneer families began to arrive. Members of the Belcher, Blich, Campbell, Dieffenwierth, Hamlin, Hammock, Harn, Johnson, Lowe, Lowrey, Kilgore, McMullen, Meares, Taylor, Whitehurst, and Wilcox families, to name a few, established homesteads in the Largo area during the mid and late 1800s. At a time when thoroughfares were little more than rough-hewn trails through the densely growing pines and palmettos, kith and kin of these early settlers knew that life was about day-to-day survival: feeding the family; tending the crops; and avoiding intrusions, whether natural weather disasters, predatory local fauna or displaced Seminole Indians. It was a time when children played in scrub populated by the likes of bears, panthers and alligators, and nearby neighbors might have been a day’s hike away. Settlement came first, city-building much later.

Members of the McMullen family left important footprints all along the Pinellas Peninsula. James Parramore McMullen became the first family member to arrive in the Tampa Bay region, though he made his initial journey by necessity rather than choice: The Georgia native came to Territorial Florida as an eighteen year-old man suffering

from tuberculosis, then often known as “consumption.” To prevent exposure to other family members, James McMullen’s father told his third and namesake son to leave their home in Quitman, Georgia, until his health improved. Young Jim wandered into the Territory of Florida in search of a solitary location. He arrived in the Rocky Point area along Old Tampa Bay sometime in 1841. He later moved to a higher tract of land at a bluff near the present-day west end of the Courtney Campbell and the north end of the Bayside Bridge. While living in solitude, he enjoyed a bountiful supply of seafood, wildlife, and sunshine. Soon, his tuberculosis went into remission and he returned to Georgia. After witnessing Jim’s recovery and hearing his description of the sparsely settled lands as “the closest thing to heaven he could imagine,” his six brothers decided to visit the area. Between 1841 and 1871, each of the McMullen brothers settled in the region from Safety Harbor to Lealman, with most of them owning land in the Largo area at one time or another.

Daniel McMullen, the fourth brother, became the second to establish a claim along the Pinellas Peninsula. Dan was seventeen in 1843, when his older brother rejoined the family. By late 1844, Jim had left for the settlement of Melendez in Benton (now Hernando) County to marry Elizabeth Campbell. Over the next few years, Jim and Elizabeth started a family and settled in the Coachman area (now part of Clearwater). Dan followed his older brother’s path. He married Margaret Ann Campbell, the younger sister of Elizabeth, in a November 1851 ceremony near present-day Brooksville. That same year, Dan and Margaret Ann secured a homestead in the Largo area, near the eastern boundary of the current intersection of Missouri Avenue and Rosery Road, including part of the site commonly known as the “Markley Grove” property.

The newlyweds probably settled on their land by early 1852. The elevation of the land and good drainage provided an excellent location for the cultivation of crops and vegetables. At this time, very few settlers lived in the general Largo area. However, by 1844 a surveyor named A. M. Randolph had set aside township and range boundaries in the area. Randolph also noted the presence of a large body of water indicated as “Lake Tolulu.” Later known as Lake Largo, this fresh water reservoir occupied an area south of East Bay Drive between Seminole Boulevard/Missouri Avenue and Starkey/Keene Road.

Dan and Jim McMullen collaborated on agricultural pursuits and expanded their families during the 1850s. Together, they raised and herded livestock, especially cattle, on the open range in and between present-day Largo and Clearwater. With few nearby settlers, they lived with little interruption or interference. Both brothers also grew crops. The brothers McMullen and sisters Campbell also witnessed the growth of their families: James and Elizabeth raised eleven children, while Daniel and Margaret Ann had nine children. By 1856, Dan and Margaret sold their land, left the Pinellas Peninsula, and returned to southern Georgia. Family recollections indicate that Dan most likely returned to the McMullen farmstead to take care of his aging parents.

Around the same time that the McMullens arrived on the scene, another well-known pioneer family settled in the area: the Taylors. According to *Largo...Then 'til...*, William Taylor and his wife Lavincia, natives of Georgia born in the 1780s, applied for a land grant under the Armed Occupation Act. They acquired land near Brooksville, but also traveled to the Pinellas Peninsula, possibly as early as the 1830s. In 1850, James Stevens—considered “the father of Clearwater” because he submitted the earliest land claim in that area—persuaded the Taylors’s son, John Stancil (also spelled “Stancel”), to

leave Brooksville and purchase land along the waterfront near Drew and Jeffords streets, a location close to the site of the former Fort Harrison, an outpost during the Second Seminole War. A couple of early narratives claim that Taylor, a slave owner at the time, made an interesting offer on part of the land: Allegedly, one of Taylor's female slaves had attempted to harm him and his family by poisoning their coffee. Taylor supposedly traded this woman for some of Stevens's land. Thus, according to a 1917 typewritten narrative from the Clearwater Woman's Club, "the greater part of Clearwater once sold for a (N)egro woman, and a very unamiable one at that."

By 1854, James McMullen established a log school for early families in northern and eastern Pinellas on the second floor of his sugar house. Meanwhile, John S. Taylor and other members of the McMullen family built First Free School, also known as Taylor School, for children in the Clearwater/Largo area. In early 1858, David B. Turner and Robert J. Whitehurst acquired Taylor's property and created the area's first post office. While Turner opened a small mercantile outpost in the coastal settlement then known as "Clear Water Harbor," members of the Taylor family also became involved in local commercial and political activities. Indeed, John Stancil was the first of four generations of Taylors to serve in the Florida legislature.

Though the McMullens and Taylors came from Georgia, other early settlers hailed from the Bahamas. John Thomas Lowe, the second of seven children born to William and Mary Anne Russell Lowe, was born in February 1830 at Green Turtle Cay. He spent much of his childhood in and around Nassau and the Bahamian islands, though events within the British Empire soon brought members of his family to the Florida Keys. In 1833, the Parliament passed the United Kingdom Emancipation Act, a law that ended

slavery in many parts of the British Empire. As a result, many Bahamian “Conchs” decided to relocate to the Florida Keys to take advantage of new economic opportunities. At the age of ten, John T. Lowe joined his family as they left Nassau for Key West in late 1840. John often accompanied his father as he ran a schooner between Key West and Cedar Keys that carried mail, lumber, and other provisions.

In December 1853, Captain John Thomas Lowe married the former Laura D. Meares, a Nassau native and daughter of William and Miriam Roberts Meares, in a Key West ceremony. During their trips, the Lowes occasionally stopped along the bluffs south of Clearwater’s harbor in search of fresh water and a safe place to anchor. In 1858, John transported government surveyors to the region and learned that officials had never completed formal surveys of many areas in southern Florida, including parts of the Pinellas Peninsula. After the surveyors had finished their work, Lowe secured a homestead along the sparsely settled coast.

He arrived at an area known as “The Narrows” by the summer of 1859. There, for \$1.25 an acre, he homesteaded approximately eighty acres along the intracoastal waterway at a place later known as “Lowe’s Landing.” Lowe and his wife, who was pregnant (with son Wesley B. Lowe) at the time, traveled to this remote location on their schooner *Seadrift* with their three year-old son Jefferson and Captain John’s parents (William and Mary Anne Russell Lowe). The young family brought all of its belongings on this journey. Also making the voyage were Laura’s mother (Miriam Roberts Meares), her two brothers (William and Richard Turtle Horn Meares), other members of the Meares family, and Captain August Archer. Some members of the Meares family settled on lands about two miles below the Lowe homestead, in present-day Oakhurst.

The remote homestead offered the settlers protection and an abundant supply of food. According to a story passed along by John T. Lowe's grandchildren, family members saw a mother bear and two cubs near a large oak tree along the shoreline shortly after they arrived. One of the cubs became the first meal for the settlers, who believed that the old, majestic tree must have served as a landmark for the Indians that had once lived in the region. The Lowes and Meares families cleared some of the coastal hammock, cultivated vegetables and citrus, raised livestock, and enjoyed a bounty of fish and shellfish in nearby waters. They constructed simple log cabins and a log church. They started a cemetery next to the church after the death of William Lowe in November 1859. Shortly after William's death, the Lowes celebrated the birth of Wesley Brownell Lowe on December 6.

Many of these earlier settlers fought in the Civil War. There were about fifty families in the Pinellas area at the onset of the Civil War, according to the names on the infantry company rolls from Tallahassee. Some Largo-area names on the 1861 "call to arms" roster included: Campbell, Crawford, Griner, Parker, Rogers, Tillman, Turner, White, Whitehurst, and Youngblood. Most of the soldiers who hailed from these Western Hillsborough families defended the Confederacy in far-away states; few stayed behind to protect the home front. Some of those who did remain in the state during the war ended up fighting Union blockades, while others rambled around at large, making life unpleasant for any Unionist sympathizers who strayed too far into the pine scrub hinterland.

Members of the McMullen family played an important role as members of the Confederate military and the "Cow Cavalry." Dan McMullen joined five of his six

brothers in fighting on the side of the Confederacy during the Civil War. In 1860, Captain James Parramore McMullen became Major of the 20th Regiment of the Florida Militia. Despite his anti-secessionist feelings, which caused him great unpopularity, he made up his mind to support his adopted state and served in the Confederate Army. James organized a company of volunteers at Clear Water Harbor during the summer of 1861. By late 1863, Daniel left his family at their Georgia farmstead, an area away from the battles of the war, so that he could enlist in the Confederate forces. He joined Captain John McNeill's Independent Company, a unit of the Florida Infantry based at Brooksville. Earlier that summer, James McMullen had enlisted in the same company. In time, both served in Company D of the 1st Battalion of the Florida Special Cavalry, under the leadership of Colonel Charles J. Munnerlyn. This unit was responsible for driving cows from grazing fields in Florida to locations in Georgia and the Carolinas. They also removed Union sympathizers from peninsular Florida. The livestock led by members of this "Cow Cavalry" provided the hides, tallow, and meat to sustain Confederate forces during the war.

John Thomas Lowe joined family members Alfred and William E. Lowe as members of the state coastal forces who worked as blockade runners. During the war, members of the Lowe and Meares families fought in distant battles. In April 1862, John Thomas arrived in Tampa to enlist in Company K, 7th Florida Infantry, of the Confederate States Army. He served under Colonel Madison Starke Perry, leader of the 7th Infantry and former governor of Florida (1857-1861). In 1863, he transferred to service in the Confederate Navy. Richard Turtle Horn Meares served with Confederate

forces, while William Brownell Meares fought in a Florida regiment until suffering wounds and losing an eye in battle.

Local families struggled during the war years. The blockade limited their ability to acquire provisions, such as flour. With the nearest railroad more than one-hundred miles away in Cedar Keys, families became self-sufficient and persevered. For example, during the more than three years that John Lowe was away from home, his wife and children spent much of their time hunting, fishing, growing sugar cane, and harvesting salt from the nearby waters. John Lowe returned to Lowe's Landing after the war. Though he had not suffered wartime wounds, the walk from Virginia to the family homestead must have been exhausting. According to one family account, when Wesley saw a man with a long beard and ax approach his home, the young child fearfully hid and his mother fainted. That bearded "stranger" was none other than Captain J. T. Lowe returning home after years in battle.

Dan McMullen brought his family back to the area in October 1865. The journey from southern Georgia along the small paths and corduroy roads took nearly one month, as Daniel and Margaret Ann—who was pregnant at the time—also had to watch over their children (John James, William, Daniel, Josephine, and Eli). As they returned to central Pinellas, the McMullens certainly noticed dramatic changes to the sparsely settled landscape. Union soldiers and Southern marauders had damaged many cabins and farmsteads during the Civil War. Dan reacquired his land holdings in the Largo area, reestablished a homestead, cleared the land, and started to raise crops. At that time, an abundance of bears, deer, and turkeys populated the frontier. John James, Dan's oldest

child, remembered on many occasions hearing the loud squeal of pigs in the night, knowing then that a bear had attacked some of the family's swine for a meal.

Daniel McMullen built bridges with his neighbors, erected a signature house on the frontier, and strengthened his agribusiness holdings. During 1867, Dan held public office for the first and (most likely) only time when the Board of County Commissioners in Hillsborough named him to a one-year term as one of three road commissioners for District # 1, the Old Tampa district. His knowledge of the disjointed road network throughout Western Hillsborough made him a logical choice for this appointment. By the spring of 1868, family members prepared the lumber from native pine and started to build the original rooms of their home. The family moved into their new house in August 1868. This structure, used by subsequent generations of the McMullen family for the next 124 years, now resides at Heritage Village. Dan also built a log smokehouse, corn crib, and other structures on the property. The family cultivated cotton, sugar cane, and vegetables. Dan also raised chicken, hogs, and cattle along the frontier. According to the 1870 census, he estimated the value of his lands at \$600 and his personal estate at \$475, amounts no doubt lowered by the malaise that had stifled the region's economy in the years immediately following the Civil War. By the 1870s, Dan shifted from cotton to citrus and acquired additional acreage for his growing cattle enterprises. According to some family narratives, Dan had acquired nearly 1,500 cattle by 1890, making him one of the largest—if not the largest—cattle farmer in Western Hillsborough.

The Lowes resumed their maritime travels along Florida's west coast after the Civil War. In October 1867, Alfred Lowe exchanged vows with Mary J. Whitehurst, a member of a pioneer family in western Hillsborough County. They soon settled in Key

West. Alfred's father, William A. Lowe, settled near Clear Water Harbor by about 1865. Alonzo Lowe, William's son and Alfred's younger brother, later acquired land along present-day Indian Rocks Road, north of J. T. Lowe's property, and married Julia Whitehust. Meanwhile, Captain John Lowe traveled between Lowe's Landing and Key West for Laura's health and so their children could attend schools on the Florida Keys in Monroe County. In March 1867, John T. and Laura Lowe welcomed a daughter, Mary Ellen, and in November 1872, Laura gave birth to their youngest child, Asa Milton Lowe. During this period, the Captain constructed and ran schooners—including one known as the *Sea Drift*—for mail and freight service between Cedar Keys and Key West.

The settlements around Lowe's Landing expanded in the years following the Civil War. By the 1870s, John T. Lowe constructed a clapboard house and a small general store along The Narrows. As the community around the Lowe property grew, it needed a name. Either J. T. Lowe or Captain Hamlin—one-time postmaster at Cedar Keys who also trolled the waters between Key West and Florida's big bend—named the place "Anona" for the sweet custard apples brought to the settlement from Key West. These tropical apples disappeared from the region after the rough freezes of the early 1890s. The Anona community, an area flanking Indian Rocks Road south of West Bay Drive to Walsingham Road, includes some of the earliest tracts settled in the Largo region after the Armed Occupation Act. By 1883 Jefferson, John Lowe's oldest son, distributed mail and operated the store for the nascent community. Jefferson served as the only postmaster at Anona, a mail point that operated between November 1883 and February 1922.

W. A. "Uncle Billy" O'Quinn, whose family arrived from Taylor County in January 1868, recalled seeing his relatives ship their farm products from Lowe's Landing

on one of Captain John T. Lowe's schooners. The O'Quinn family provides an important and direct link between the McMullens and the Walsinghams, one that predates the arrival of these families to the Largo area. According to genealogical records, Mary Ann McMullen—second child and eldest daughter of William and Susannah Elizabeth McMullen—married Andrew Martin O'Quinn in November 1859 at Perry, Florida. While living in and around Taylor County, Florida, Andrew and Mary Ann started a family. Their children included: William Allen (later known as "Uncle Billy"), Andrew Edward, Hiram Randolph, Elizabeth Wineyford, Mary Adona, and David Henderson O'Quinn. Mary Adona O'Quinn—fourth child of Andrew and Mary Ann McMullen O'Quinn and granddaughter of William McMullen—married Jesse Ancil Walsingham, a talented farmer and entrepreneur who settled along Ridge Road south of Largo.

During retrospective interviews in the mid-1900s, William A. "Uncle Billy" O'Quinn vividly described the areas around Walsingham Reservoir and Ridge Road in the years after the Civil War. Three of O'Quinn's closest neighbors were John, Thomas, and James P. McMullen. Aside from a handful of organized groves, most of them run by McMullens, few settlers occupied land in this area. "Uncle Billy" remembered a childhood along the central Pinellas ridge that included an abundance of deer, geese, wild turkeys, hogs, bears, and an occasional panther. A hunter for many years, he recalled driving deer from the family's sweet potato and pea fields, and claimed he "could not begin to tell you of [all] the different wild game and little animals that were in this county at that time." He often wore heavy tin leggings made by a blacksmith when trapping small animals such as snakes and alligators. Educated in a simple log school, William remembered gaps in the walls so large that a person "could throw a rabbit through the

cracks.” At an early age, he learned how to farm and to hitch up the oxen for the long, monthly trip around Old Tampa Bay to the nearest trading post, Tampa Town. When traveling far from home or visiting a distant neighbor, he marked the trees with an axe so that he could remember how to return home.

Before the arrival of the Orange Belt Railway in 1888, most settlements in the Largo area sat along or very close to the water. Settlers at early outposts such as Dunedin, Clear Water Harbor, Anona, Indian Rocks Beach, Bay Pines, and Johns Pass conducted much of their commerce and travel along the intracoastal waterways and the Gulf of Mexico. Supplies often arrived by boat from Cedar Keys or Key West. Due to the primitive network of paths and roadways, even shipments from Tampa often came either by schooner around the Pinellas Peninsula, or by boat to Jim McMullen’s settlement at Bay View (near the present-day intersection of the Courtney Campbell Causeway and Bayside Bridge). Homesteaders of interior parcels—pioneers such as Daniel McMullen, Andrew M. O’Quinn, John J. McMullen, Samuel H. Kilgore, and Albert N. Duncan, to name a few—often used part of their land to cultivate citrus, grow crops, or herd livestock and relied on schooners and ships to transport goods to and from market.

Captain Charles Wharton Johnson moved from northern Florida to Cedar Keys in 1865. During the Civil War, Johnson had served in the Confederate navy. His ship, christened the *C.S.S. Spray*, gained notoriety during the war for its success in blockade running, as it maneuvered around Union patrol boats that hoped to choke commerce along the Southern coast. Muster rolls note that Johnson was “Acting Master” of the ship. After the war, Johnson returned this eight-ton ship to merchant service, and renamed it

the *Evening Star*. By the late 1860s, he began ferrying mail, lumber, and other provisions along Florida's western shore between Cedar Keys, Tampa, Ft. Myers, and Key West.

In the early 1870s, Captain Charles Wharton Johnson regularly sailed his ship along the Gulf coast between Cedar Keys and Fort Myers to deliver mail, supplies, and occasional travelers. According to a published history of Largo, he encountered bad weather while traveling near Clear Water Harbor during one of his trips. Some residents along the bluff witnessed Captain Johnson in distress, and brought him and his son, Levin William Johnson, to shore. Other narratives claim that Johnson happened upon the ridge where the Belleview Biltmore Hotel currently sits and explored the area. However he arrived, he soon applied for a homestead on the land now occupied by the hotel and brought his family from Cedar Keys. Captain Johnson continued his shipping trade but also attempted citrus farming. He built a small home on his parcel in Belleair by 1872. He also purchased other lands around the intersection of Bay Drive and Seminole/Missouri. The Johnsons drew much attention when they built a three story house on the present site of Largo Central Park. This impressive residence included five fireplaces, a cistern that provided running water, mahogany paneling and banisters crafted from wood Johnson had obtained in Honduras.

The Kilgore family also homesteaded in the area in the mid-1800s. James Summers Kilgore acquired a 100-acre homestead near Anona and became one of the earliest pastors at Anona Methodist Church. His son, Samuel Henry Kilgore, homesteaded 160 acres of land west of present-day downtown Largo (generally south of West Bay Drive and Indian Rocks Road). According to a published history of Largo, Samuel married Elpenice "Mittie" Hart, the sister of Clear Water Harbor's fourth mayor,

Will Hart, and the niece of Reconstruction-era Governor Ossian Bingley Hart. Born in March 1850 on her father's homestead, Mittie told others during her life that she believed she was the first white female child born and raised on the Pinellas Peninsula. Samuel had four sons who became expert cultivators of citrus that built close ties with other pioneer families. For example, Henry Kilgore tied the knot with Mary Belcher, while his brother, Jessie Barnard Kilgore, exchanged vows with Gussie Belcher. Rev. James Summers Kilgore officiated unions between members of the Hart, McMullen, Meares, Summerlin, and Whitehurst families, to name a few. Even as late as the 1930s, many pioneer families went to a site in Anona known as the "Kilgore oyster camp" for picnics and church gatherings.

Dan McMullen's extended family began to shape the Largo area. Sons John James and William Alonzo McMullen followed similar paths. John James became an early educator on the Pinellas Peninsula. Educated in log cabins, he later taught classes in some of the first school facilities in the central Pinellas region—including the Anona School—for about fifteen years. In 1880, he married Joseph Drayton "Jo" Ramage, a native of Ocala and daughter of a Colonel Ramage and Rosannah Kilgore. Between 1881 and 1901, John James and Jo Ramage McMullen had ten children. In 1883, John James entered public life as a member of the 1883 Florida Legislature. His leadership efforts in the Hillsborough County legislative delegation won him praise from state Senator John T. Lesley of Tampa. In a letter to the senior Daniel McMullen, Lesley praised John James as a "young man of no ordinary talent and if a field is offered him, his future is a fixture, his station high, and far above the mediocrity of man. John James supported his large family by farming, growing citrus, and raising chickens and livestock. He acquired large land

holdings in the Seminole/Largo area. William Alonzo fell in love with Rosanna Benjamin Ramage, younger sister of Josephine Drayon Ramage. A member of the pioneer Dieffenwierth family conducted their 12 July 1883 wedding ceremony in the Largo area. William Alonzo and Rosanna Ramage McMullen raised four sons and three daughters while living in the Largo area.

Siblings Daniel Thomas and Josephine Catherine McMullen also found spouses, raised families, and maintained strong connections with central Pinellas after leaving the Daniel McMullen homestead. Young Daniel became a Methodist minister who rode the circuit, though he later pursued farming and citrus growing. He also taught classes at a school in the Curlew area during the early 1880s. At some point, family members also gave him the nickname “Seat” (or “Sete”). The junior Daniel married Symadocia Ella “Docia” Freedman in 1887 and raised nine children while living at a home in the Largo area. Meanwhile, Josephine McMullen raised a family with Elias E. Belcher. The native of Henry County, Virginia, married Josephine in November 1877. Other branches of the Belcher and McMullen clans also came together during the late 1800s. For example, William A. Belcher and the former Sally McMullen—daughter of Dr. Bethel McMullen—lived in the Largo area during the 1880s.

Eli Bartow McMullen started a large family and later served as the first tax collector in Pinellas County. Fondly known as “Uncle Eli” to kith and kin, he tied the knot with Emma C. Cox in March 1885. Eli and Emma had nine children. By 1890, he worked in the mercantile business. He soon became the manager of the Farmers’ Alliance Exchange, the largest store in the Largo area. Beginning in 1903, he opened his own store and ran it for nine years with the assistance of his sons. Two of Eli’s children married

members of the Ulmer family. Marion Wheeler Ulmer and wife Dora Ellis came to this area shortly after 1900 and operated turpentine stills near namesake Ulmerton Road. Daughter Winifred exchanged vows with Henry Ulmer, an entrepreneur who later organized the Indian Rocks Fruit Packing Company in the 1920s. Son Chester Bartow McMullen, a 1920 graduate of Largo High School, married childhood friend Veda Ulmer in 1923.

Daughter Margaret Nancy (Nannie) McMullen also remained in the area. As a child, “Nannie” attended classes at a log school near the Largo Road at Curlew. For awhile, she boarded at the home of Walton Whitehurst while taking classes at the school where older brother “Tommie” also worked as a teacher. She remembered seeing her father arrive at the homestead on horseback with two bears he had killed in the nearby woods. Clara Duncan, a neighbor whose family grew citrus near present-day Keene Road, offered young Nancy piano lessons as soon as the child learned how to read. In time, she learned how to play the organ for services at Curlew’s Methodist church. When her mother became ill after the birth of Charles B. McMullen in the mid-1870s, Nannie assumed a large role in raising her three younger brothers (Robert Lee, Donald Campbell, and Charles Breckenridge). When father Daniel McMullen sent her to a Largo sawmill to get boards for orange crates sometime in 1890, she met the proprietor, “a handsome young man” named James Hardage. He apparently told some of his employees he expected to meet Nannie again, even if it meant that “he had to walk a hundred miles.” They courted for a decade, with James moving the sawmill near the Dan McMullen’s property.

Robert Lee “Uncle Bob” McMullen worked as a dentist and farmer along the Pinellas Peninsula. Bob later moved to Atlanta to enroll in dentistry classes at Southern Medical College, a school established in 1878 that later merged with other institutions to form Emory University’s school of medicine. Valedictorian of his class, “Uncle Bob” returned to Florida and established a practice in St. Petersburg in 1896. Every two weeks, he made a steamboat trip to Palmetto to meet with patients in Manatee County. He later moved to the area east of Largo by 1898-1899 and built a two-story dwelling on old Keene (now McMullen) Road, where he enjoyed showing visitors his grove and describing his agricultural innovations. Small in stature but with an immense imagination, “Doctor Bob” always looked for ways to improve the productivity of his lands. He experimented with various plants. During the summer of 1891, he planted a potato patch at his home near present-day downtown Largo, one of the earliest dwellings in the community. During his life, he planted more than 100 varieties of citrus trees on his acreage. His pecans and cassava plants won accolades from many. Bob enjoyed tapioca pudding, a dessert he often called “cassava pone.” At times, he also made puddings out of sweet potatoes.

As the McMullen family grew, so did the Anona community. John Thomas Lowe donated approximately two acres of land to serve as the site of the Anona Methodist Church and cemetery. Services began in 1872 as members organized a community church serving all Christian faiths. Earliest services probably took place in private homes. Captain John Lowe, along with sons Jefferson and Wesley, joined members of the Meares and Kilgore families and George Hammock in erecting a “rough board house” that served as Anona’s church until 1882. It was also the area’s schoolhouse from at least

1874 until 1890. At this time, the Methodist circuit riders who offered services at Anona also led congregations at Clear Water Harbor, Indian Pass, Bay View, and other locations on the peninsula. Miriam Meares Wilcox described dramatic plays on the building's porch, when curtains covered the porch as a stage, and kerosene lamps and torches provided light. People traveled from at least as far as Dunedin to watch these performances. In 1882, settlers built a permanent church made by cypress and other trees. They also moved the remains of those interred at the original cemetery to a new location. A new school opened in 1890 on property provided by Richard A. Meares. Recreational activities of the time included candy pullings (boiling molasses or sugar cane, stretching it, and cutting it into hard candies), horseback rides, and numerous swimming parties along the Gulf of Mexico.

More neighbors arrived in the 1870s. In 1875, another prominent early Largo name appeared when John Gideon Blich arrived from Ocala. In 1877, he married Cimodocia Carolyn Hammock, a member of an Anona-area pioneer family. The newlyweds lived on land owned by Captain Johnson, exchanging labor for the eventual ownership of the property. The Blich home—used at different times as a depot, post office, and general gathering place—played an important role in the development of the town in the years to come. They welcomed the arrival of a daughter, Lula Blich, in 1878. Near Lake Largo, the Duncans of New Hampshire homesteaded on 160 acres close to Druid Road, Lake Avenue, and Keene Road by 1878. Originally from Keene, New Hampshire, the Duncans started to grow citrus in mid-Pinellas shortly after their arrival. Women in the family opened a “Keene Post Office” at the house and distributed mail to nearby residents.

In 1880, James Miller Dieffenwierth came to the area from Louisiana to acquire land grants for him and his father, Phillip. Two years later, James returned with his wife, Sarah Eliza, and their five children. Between 1884 and 1888, the couple had three more children while living in the area near North Missouri Avenue. Phillip and James, as Methodist ministers, rode the circuit between Anona, Largo, Seminole, and Safety Harbor. James later organized the first Methodist church in the village of St. Petersburg, traveling to southern Pinellas on a small carriage using plank boards to cross over the many creeks and muddy paths in the days before the railroad.

The construction of the Orange Belt Railway and an eventual change in the line's ownership accelerated development in and around the Largo settlement. In the early 1880s, Hamilton Disston had purchased substantial acreage throughout Western Hillsborough as part of a larger acquisition of four million acres of Florida land. Soon, Disston brought in agents to parcel, sell, and develop his holdings from Tarpon Springs to Disston City (now Gulfport). Meanwhile, Henry Bradley Plant had acquired a charter to bring a railroad line to Tampa. A native of Connecticut, Plant first came to Florida in the spring of 1853. After the Civil War, he expanded his interests in the shipping and transportation businesses. Plant's trains pulled into Tampa Town by early 1884, and over the next decade he expanded his network to include steamships and an extension of the railroad lines to Port Tampa, along the Interbay Peninsula. He soon began to design an opulent resort—the Tampa Bay Hotel—along the western banks of the Hillsborough River. This structure, presently the campus of the University of Tampa, dominated the skyline of Tampa by the early 1890s at a time when the Pinellas Peninsula remained “off the beaten path.”

Disston hoped to secure a railroad along Pinellas to serve as a catalyst for his interests, but animosity between him and Plant forced him to look for another locomotive company. By late 1886, Disston decided to visit Peter Demens, a Russian immigrant who had recently taken control of the Orange Belt Investment Company's line from Sanford to Oakland, near Lake Apopka. Throughout 1887 and early 1888, workers extended the Orange Belt from Lake Apopka to southern Pinellas, though not to Disston City. A disagreement between Disston and Demens led to a new agreement between the Orange Belt Investment Company and "General" John Constantine Williams that brought the railroad to a terminus along the St. Petersburg waterfront in 1888.

Stories abound regarding where Largo got its name. During an October 1949 interview, Dr. Bob McMullen told a correspondent with the *Largo Sentinel* how pioneers selected "Largo" as the name of the settlement. In the early 1880s, Hamilton Disston had dispatched a man named Livingstone to examine lands he purchased. Livingstone had hired Malcolm Campbell McMullen, one of Doctor Bob's uncles, to assist him in this endeavor. One evening, young Bob followed his father, Daniel, to the campsite shared by Malcolm McMullen and Mr. Livingstone. During their conversations, Livingstone said he planned to rename the body of water once known as "Big Lake" or "Lake Tolulu." He called the impressive body of water "Lake Largo," using the Spanish word *largo* to denote the lake's large size. Since Disston's purchase included the lake, Livingstone certainly did not have to seek outside permission from other settlers to adorn the lake with a new name.

The settlement west of Lake Largo needed a name as the Orange Belt Railway moved south along the Pinellas Peninsula from Clear Water. According to Doctor Bob, in

late 1887 or early 1888 Gideon Blich, Joel McMullen, and Rufus McMullen met with others who planned to build a railroad station for the settlement. Discussion centered on “Lulaville” as a possible name that would honor Lula, one of Blich’s daughters. Such practices were common when naming new settlements: For awhile, a small station about one mile north of Largo went by the name “Armour,” in honor of H. O. Armour of Chicago, one of the men who helped Peter Demens finance the construction of the narrow-gauge railroad. As the oldest man present, Rufus suggested that the depot carry the name “Largo,” reflecting the name of the nearby lake. Rufus donated land for the station, and soon people knew the settlement as Largo.

The construction of the Orange Belt Railway along the Pinellas Peninsula, and through nearby Largo, brought much activity to the region around The Narrows. In time, Largo eclipsed and absorbed Anona. Within a few years, Captain J. T. Lowe retired and decided to sell his schooners—the *Emma* and *Asa M.*—to spongers in Tarpon Springs. Over the next few years, the iron horse replaced the boat as the primary means of travel for many settlers. The path of the rails through present-day Largo led to wide-scale development to the east and northeast of Anona. Railroads replaced shipping as the preferred form of transport, and many farmers along the central Pinellas Peninsula decided to send perishables by rail. Again, the Blich family found itself on the front row of history: the train platform sat right in front of their house. Mrs. Blich played shipping agent for the citrus growers during those times when they could not hang around and wait for the train to come pulling through the town. She would listen for the train and then interrupt her laundry or other household chores to run out and flag down the engine

The railroad's arrival in St. Petersburg promoted settlement and commerce throughout Pinellas, as well as a regional rift. Demens and his partners had borrowed funds from a Philadelphia syndicate and defaulted on the loan by 1889. Soon, Demens sold his interest in the project and left Florida. The narrow gauge line, though poorly constructed, brought settlers to the communities along the Pinellas Peninsula's backbone. Although the arrival of the railroad promoted urbanization, regularly scheduled train service also fostered agricultural pursuits as large landowners expanded their groves, cultivated bountiful and diverse crop yields, and continued to raise livestock and harvest turpentine. Local children rejoiced as their parents transformed their cotton fields into citrus groves. For example, "Uncle Bob" McMullen noted his pleasure when his father, Daniel, switched from fields to groves: "I hated picking cotton and was mighty glad when the citrus trees brought in income so we did not have to grow it."

Henry Plant purchased the Orange Belt line in the early 1890s and within a few years, new subdivisions north of Largo also sprouted from the ground. When residents of St. Petersburg derailed Plant's plans to build a signature hotel in their small village, Plant decided to purchase some of the Captain Charles Johnson's real estate north of Largo. Plant then hired workers to improve the railroad and commissioned architects to design a new hotel and subdivision. Laborers converted the narrow gauge rails of the Orange Belt into a standard gauge line. The former Orange Belt soon became part of a larger railroad network in the Plant System that connected shorter roads in Alabama, Florida, Georgia, and South Carolina under a standard gauge. Meanwhile, Plant commissioned J. W. Newman to conduct a survey of the region and design plans for a community he named "Belleair" by 1896. Plant also hired Tampa architects Francis J. Kennard and Michael J.

Miller to draw up plans for his Belleview Hotel, now the Belleview Biltmore. By the summer of 1895, over three hundred workers came to the area to clear the land and begin construction of the hotel. The Belleview Hotel opened for guests in January 1897.

The McMullens and other pioneer families continued to diversify their business holdings during the end of the 1800s. The elder Dan McMullen still conducted cattle drives across the Pinellas Peninsula, including trips that brought herds to the bluffs near the present-day grounds of the Belleview Biltmore Hotel before its construction. The family's citrus holdings continued to expand, especially as many of Uncle Dan's children became farmers and grove owners. Dan became a partner in Largo's first ice company and held an interest in the Farmers' Alliance Exchange, the largest mercantile store in region by the 1890s. Rufus McMullen's "slow but sure" prediction for the transformation of Largo into a municipality came true as the first subdivision was platted in 1891. Fourteen years before the incorporation of the Town of Largo, R. J. Whitehurst commissioned D. W. Meeker to survey the first subdivision in the area. Some of the others involved in this enterprise included Daniel McMullen, W. A. Belcher, and Alonzo Lowe. Other families, among them Browns, Arthurs, Blitches, Belchers, Campbells, and Hammocks, were part of the file in Plat Book 1 of Hillsborough County records. The subdivision encompassed land in the center of what is considered the downtown area between West Bay Drive south and Fourth Avenue, and from Missouri Avenue west to Fourth Street.

Newcomers during the 1890s, such as the Walsinghams, would continue to shape the region well into the twentieth century. Jesse Ancil Walsingham moved to the Pinellas peninsula from Taylor County, Florida, in 1895. By the summer of 1901, Walsingham

and Martin McMullen delivered ice to people in the Seminole area, while Jesse's father-in-law, A. M. O'Quinn, finished the construction of his home and planted orange trees on a parcel near Largo. In addition to delivering ice, McMullen and Walsingham also engaged in the "beef business" during the summer of 1901. In September 1901, Jesse constructed a new barn and packing house on the Seminole/Largo frontier. By October, Walsingham focused on the cultivation and shipping of oranges and a large field of eggplants. At the end of this busy year, the Walsingham family moved back to its "beautiful home" on Missouri Avenue, then a narrow dirt road. By February 1902, Jesse Walsingham butchered hogs and provided pork for the St. Petersburg market.

Members of the Walsingham family continued their involvement in commercial, civic, and agricultural activities as the movement to create an independent county grew along the Pinellas peninsula. By 1899, John Randolph Walsingham, Jesse's youngest brother, came to the area after spending time in Taylor County, Florida, and the Thomasville, Georgia, area. Shortly after his arrival, he married Lillie Ruth Meares, daughter of Anona pioneer William Fletcher Meares. During the early 1900s, John worked as a laborer, cleared land for citrus groves, and worked in a mill. John R. and Lillie Ruth Walsingham later acquired land, started their own grove, and established a home for their four children at the corner of Ridge Road and Taylor Avenue (8th Avenue SW). Meanwhile, Jesse continued his business ventures, raised crops (and children), joined the Largo Board of Trade, and advocated for the creation of a new county along the peninsula.

By 1904, the creative labors of pioneer families and newcomers had transformed west central Pinellas. Citrus groves, packing houses, turpentine plants, truck farming, and

regular rail service had reshaped the region. Soon, civic leaders called for the incorporation of Largo, the “Citrus City.” Within a few years, increased demands for agricultural, commercial, and political autonomy would lead to the creation of Pinellas County, the draining of Lake Largo, and the expansion of the small community as it grew into one of the largest entities along the peninsula. The simple life of cane grinding and smoking meats were replaced by automobiles, real estate speculation, and frenzied building activity.

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