

Once the haunt of Indians and Spanish explorers, Spanish River Park now beckons families for weekend retreats.

SPANISH RIVER

By Daniel F. Austin

Visitors and new residents to Boca Raton and vicinity soon discover the "Spanish River Park." It is an intriguing name that conjures up visions of dashing buccaneers. At the park there is a sign giving the barest details of the story. Few seem to know the entire tale, but it actually started before the Spanish period in Florida.

Between about 500 and 1500 A.D., there was a group of Indians living near the place we now call Jap Rock in Highland Beach. These people were part of a group later called "Jaega" by the Spanish. They were related, by marriage it is said, to the people that lived near Fort Pierce who called themselves the "Ais." Another group of their relatives lived on Biscayne Bay in a village known as "Tequesta."

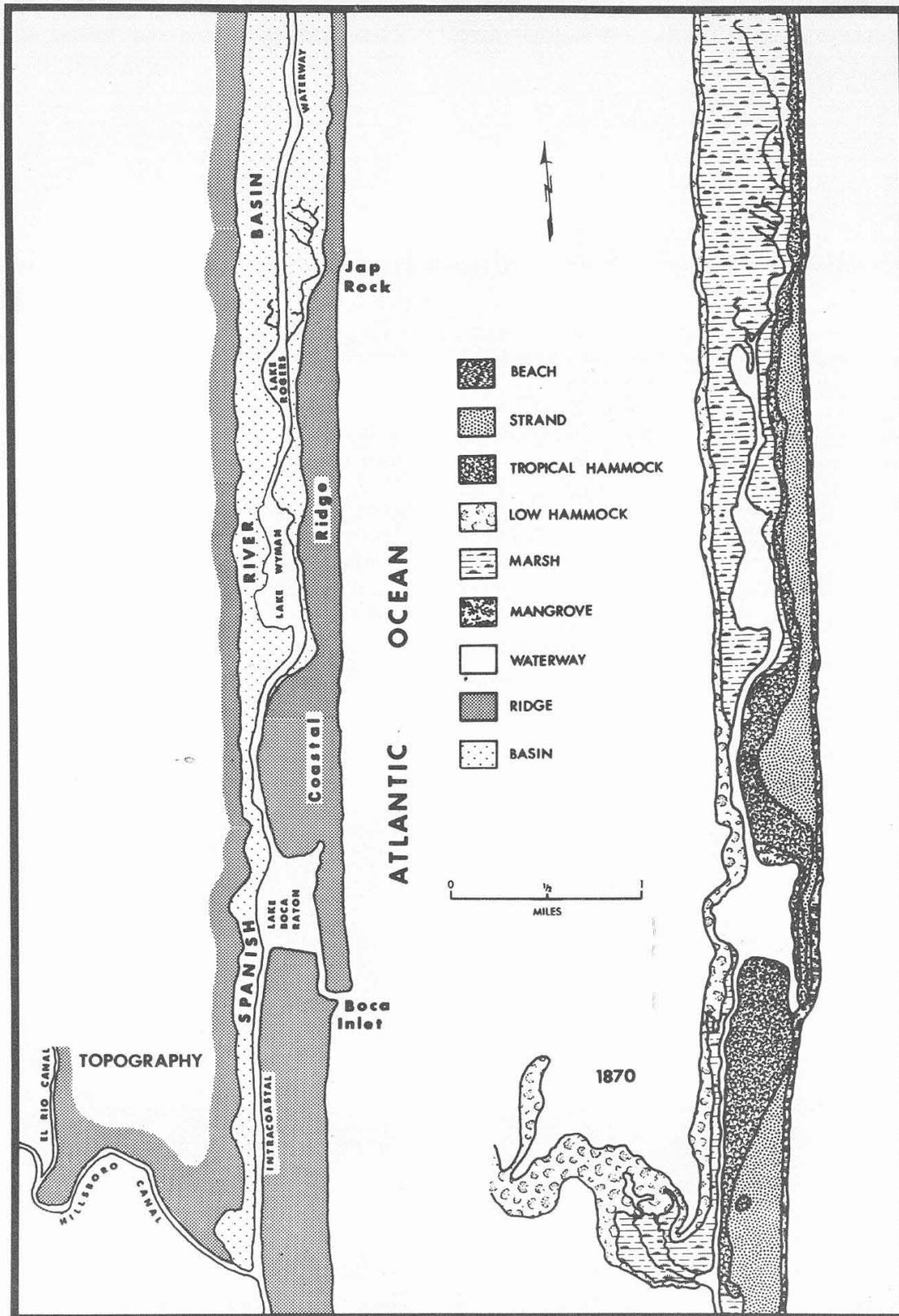
When these Indians lived here there was an inlet at Jap Rock, and they made their village by the brackish bay. Eventually the inlet closed and another opened to the south at a lake which later became Boca Raton. The opening of the new inlet created a waterway that ran from what is now Atlantic Boulevard in Delray Beach to Lake Boca Raton. This was the lagoon that Ponce de Leon found when he passed our coast in 1513. He saw no Indians, though:

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they were either hunting in the Everglades or all dead. The last time they spent in their coastal village was near 1500, and no one seems to know what happened to them.

Many Names

We have no record if Ponce de Leon stopped at the river. It was the middle of the 1500s before the Spanish, perhaps the Adelantado Pedro Mendez de Aviles himself, christened the little river near Boca Raton as "Rio Seco." From that time until the 1820s it was labeled on maps with either this Spanish name or the English translation, "Dry Inlet." One exception was made during this period by William G. DeBrahm, who changed the name to "Baracuta Inlet," but no one else used this name.



The area surrounding present-day Spanish River Park has changed a great deal in the last one hundred years. Compare its modern topographical appearance on the left with its features in 1870 at the right. The latter was reconstructed from survey maps and compared against the earliest aerial photography. All the illustrations for this article were supplied by the author.

The first description we have of Spanish River was given of the southern end, the modern Lake Boca Raton. Bernard Romans surveyed this coast in 1765 and made the following comments: "...this is the mouth of the Rio Seco which is very seldom open, having a small kind of cove, which makes a good stead for small craft. ."

There is little commentary in the available historical record, except notes about when the inlet opened and closed, until the Second Seminole War. Lieutenant J. C. Ives compiled a report on military conditions in the peninsula and gave an account of a trip from southern Lake Worth to the Hillsboro Inlet. During the time of the trip, the 1840s, the stream was called the "Little Hillsboro." This waterway was difficult to pass in the first six miles below Lake Worth, but became a respectable stream below Orange Grove Haulover (modern Atlantic Boulevard in Delray Beach). From this haulover to Lake Boca Raton, a name that was first used in 1823 by Vignoles, the stream increased in width. In the first two miles the increase was from seven to fifty feet, and by the time it passed two unnamed lakes (present Lake Rogers and Lake Wyman), and reached Lake Boca Raton, it was one hundred feet wide.

Between the 1820s and 1880s there was no inlet at Lake Boca Raton. Charles W. Pierce, one of the original "barefoot mailmen," wrote of walking past this lake on the beach and the official surveys of 1870 and 1884 showed the closed inlet and "Boca Raton Lagoon" emptying into the Hillsboro River. According to an Indian guide, probably ChaChi who was captured west of Lake Worth during the Second Seminole War, a wrecked ship had washed into the old inlet "many years ago" and was left by receding tides. Sand collecting around the remains of the ship closed the inlet.

Weekend Retreat

In 1895 the railroad reached the area, as did the Florida East Coast Canal, and these ushered in the first land boom and the beginning of the town of Boca Raton. Some time between 1895 and the 1920s the river came to be called the "Spanish River Lagoon." Among other developments, there was a coconut plantation on the northern end of the lagoon in what is now Highland Beach and, in 1908, the Japanese community of Yamato began producing an abundance of truck crops near the bank of the lagoon. On weekends the people of Yamato went to the beach and eventually gave a name to Jap Rock. For several years in the early 1900s there was a fishing camp on the east bank of the Spanish River Lagoon near what is now Spanish River Boulevard bridge.

Many changes have taken place in the Spanish

River since 1895. During that year the Florida East Coast Canal Company made the first channel through the river. It was dug fifty feet wide and five feet deep. By 1935 it had been enlarged into the Intracoastal Canal and was made even larger in 1945. This dredging of the winding Spanish River almost eliminated its former shape. For many years the only remaining fragments of the river were near its headwaters behind Jap Rock.

Drainage in the first two decades of the 1900s also changed another aspect of the old Spanish River. In the pre-drainage days the river was basically fresh water. Since the inlet was rarely open there was little chance of salt water intrusion and the varieties of vegetation reflected the absence of brine. Sawgrass was abundant. There were some mangroves in a narrow gallery along the stream, but these had only made inroads when the inlet was open or during storms when the ocean water washed over the coastal dunes. As the drainage program proceeded more and more salt water was able to invade the Spanish River. By the early 1940s mangrove swamps filled the shallow basin. Buildings and parking lots along the west side of the old river blocked runoff from rainstorms, and the salt water worked its way inland with each tide. Soon the outer fringes of the farmlands had to be abandoned because they had become so salty. A few areas were still farmed, but the crops were reduced or shifted higher up the slope to the west.



A plaque at the southern entrance to Spanish River Park commemorates the recent efforts by the people of Boca Raton to save a precious piece of green space for themselves and posterity.

Public Demand Park

The city council of Boca Raton felt growing pressure during the 1960s to provide a public beach. During the building boom of the 1950s, more and more beachfront was changed into private land. Sun-worshipping people were finding it harder to get to the ocean. Monumental multi-storied condominiums crept up the coast and threatened to make Boca Raton another Miami Beach. In the late 1960s the city of Boca Raton recognized the need for a public beachfront facility and began development of the present "Spanish River Park." The year 1969 saw the opening of the southern half of this park, and the northern part was finished in 1971. Though much of the natural hammock vegetation was removed to make parking spaces and picnic areas, some sections were allowed to remain. A large beach was opened for public recreation. While Spanish River was gone, there was--at last--a reminder that it had once existed.

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North New River Canal Lock Named to *National Register*



In March 1978 the North New River Canal Lock #1 was named to the *National Register of Historic Places*. It joins only three other nationally recognized historic sites in Broward County: the Stranahan House, the New River Inn, and the railway car, the *Ferdinand Magellan*.

In the photograph at the left, the first lock-keeper, Hamilton M. Forman, holds his infant son Charles; to his right is his wife, Blanche. The picture, taken shortly before World War One, appears here courtesy of Dr. Charles Forman.