Upham Beach

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Upham Beach, among my favorite Florida places, is one of several public beaches on the west side of Pinellas County’s barrier islands. It lies at the northern end of St. Pete Beach and the view of the Gulf of Mexico from the beach is spectacular, especially at sunset. A nearly white sand beach borders the island from north to south, with Upham Beach, almost eight hundred feet in length, making up the northern tip (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Upham Beach ca. 1954. Top of the image is to the south and the road from right side of photo to the top is the present day six-lane Gulf Blvd. on St. Pete Beach. The Gulf of Mexico is on the upper right side of the photo with Upham Beach at the far right of the gulf front. Note wide expanse of undeveloped beach front property, and unfilled, natural bayside property on the left side of the photo. (Image taken from postcard distributed by Hartman Litho Sales Company, Largo, FL).

In 1954 (the year I was born), W. W. Upham, a leading developer of St. Pete Beach, gifted the property, a designated recreation area since the 1920s, to the citizens of the town of St.
Petersburg Beach. In 1957, the town of St. Petersburg Beach joined with three other towns then on the island of Long Key and incorporated into the city of St. Petersburg Beach. The residents voted to change the name to St. Pete Beach in 1994.

One of those buying property in Upham’s early development was my father. As the story goes, my father bought a Cadillac in Pittsburgh, close to his hometown of Wellsburg, West Virginia, drove the car to Mexico where he sold it for a profit, and then flew from Mexico to Tampa to invest the profit in St. Pete Beach property. There in June of 1954, he purchased three duplex units, one of which came to be my residence and the reason for my lingering attraction to Upham Beach. This was also, unfortunately, just the beginning of the over-development of the island and erosion of the beach.

Today, thanks to more than a dozen projects and multi-millions of dollars spent on beach nourishment, Upham Beach still resembles the beach of my youth, even though St. Pete Beach does not. There are now two wooden walkways over plants at Upham Beach, but in the early 1960s there was only one path down to the sand and open water, and that path included sandspurs. Invariably, we could not reach the blank canvas of sand and bathtub warm Gulf water without having at least one full spikelet of sandspurs imbedded into someone’s foot. Today, sandspurs are rare. Likely no one misses the sandspurs at the beach, but they helped to anchor sand.

There are many contributing causes of sand erosion at Upham Beach. Natural causes include storms, hurricanes, wave action, and shoreline drift. Anthropogenic activities like removing vegetation, overcrowding, periodic dredging of Blind Pass channel to its north, and causeway constructions served to exacerbate the natural physical changes. The result was a beach that was abnormally and temporarily wide when gulf front construction of multistory residences adjacent to Upham Beach began in the 1960s. For beachgoers, when erosion progressed, there was significantly less space for the exploding number of tourists and residents (Figure 2).
Figure 2. Google Earth view of a section of St. Pete Beach, 2021. Note extensive development of gulf front and narrowing of sand border along right side of island photo. Also note dredging and filling of bayside of the island on left side of image.

But for adjacent condominiums, the encroaching gulf threatened buildings, and owners constructed seawalls to protect the residential structures. However, beaches lined by seawalls do not perform in the same manner as beaches in their natural state. Historic photos of Upham Beach illustrate the unfortunate outcome of this action. At different points over the years since, the “protective” seawall encroaches into the water with no sand to buffer the wall from the Gulf waves. (Figure 3).

Over the years since the first formal beach nourishment project at Upham Beach in 1966, coastal engineers tried different methods to supplement sand replenishment. Between 1968 and 2019, twelve renourishment events took place on St. Pete Beach for a total known cost of over $31.5 million. Recall the clichéd definition of insanity: “doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result.” There may be some truth in this sarcastic definition. Between 1966 and 2005, the multiple sand replenishment projects at Upham Beach appear to be the perfect example of
repeating the same actions while expecting a different outcome. The sand pumped onto the beach washed away repeatedly at alarming rates.

Ultimately, actions changed to complement the renourishment and the outcome improved. Pinellas County implemented a plan to install “T” shaped groins, first made from sand filled geotextile tubes, and next from rock. The project, considered successful in reducing beach erosion by the coastal engineering designer, Pinellas County and the University of South Florida, was completed in 2019. (Figure 3).

![Figure 3. A New Approach. North end of Upham Beach shown at the measurement mark in both photos. Note in photo on the left, the seawall behind two high-rise condominiums where erosion has caused the disappearance of any beach waterward of the seawalls. In the photo on the right, a sand area exists after installation of temporary T-groins. Image taken from report prepared by APTIM Government Solutions, LLC. 2019.](image)

Although helping with the shoreline, the sand itself is not the same. The repeated pumping of sand is responsible for the loss of its chirping sound. In the 1950s and early 1960s, the sand actually “squeaked” when we scuffed through it, but Upham Beach walkers no longer hear this. My mother claimed she could never stand to hear the squeak describing it as “nails on a chalkboard” when we made our way to the water’s edge, but I miss that natural music whenever I visit the beach today.
The Upham Beach of today is not identical to the beach that I grew up on, but in the midst of tourist shops and high-rise hotels, this beach is still open and upon arrival, I let the restorative action of salt air and waves lull me into thinking not much has changed.