

History & Heritage

IN SARASOTA COUNTY

From prehistoric Florida to circus-performing residents to civil rights activism and the Amish snowbird community known as Pinecraft, Sarasota County's variety of history and heritage spans nearly 12,000 years.

The opportunities to immerse yourself in the stories that shaped our area abound. The people, places, and events that occurred in the past are celebrated and cherished as we continue building toward the future.

History & Heritage Highlights



- The Historical Society of Sarasota County was founded in 1927 and hosts regular events.
- With preserved history dating back 12,000 years, Sarasota County has a vibrant story that can be experienced at attractions via tours.
 - Marie Selby Botanical Gardens' Historic Spanish Point Campus
 - Historic Trolley Tours
 - The Ringling Museum
 - Newtown Alive! Tours
 - Historic Downtown Venice
- Newtown African American Heritage Trail is the southernmost point of the U.S. Civil Rights Trail.
- A lively Amish and Mennonite Community is located in Pinecraft.



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Prehistoric Times and Original Tenents

Before Europeans arrived in what's now Sarasota County, Calusa, Tocobaga, and Timucan Tribes lived here. Historic Downtown Venice, now known as Venice Main Street, prides itself on preserving its history, while embracing the new. Originally the home of native people who lived more than 12,000 years ago, Venice remained mostly wilderness until Spanish settlers arrived in the 1800s.

Marie Selby Botanical Gardens' Historic Spanish Point campus, a 30-acre bayfront preserve and museum site in Osprey, gives a glimpse into the daily lives of these peoples as far back as 5,000 years ago. Visitors can explore ancient Native American shell mounds, literally walking inside one in an exhibit called A Window to the Past. More recent history on view here includes the Florida pioneer era of the late 1800s, with homestead buildings, a reconstructed chapel, a citrus packing house, and a working boatyard.

The Fathers of Sarasota and Venice

In the 1880s, approximately 60 Scottish families settled in Ormiston Colony, a 50,000-acre plot of land in what is now Sarasota. Sir John Gillespie Sr. partially owned the company that had purchased the land. At the end of Main Street in downtown Sarasota, a sandstone

column from a Scottish church marks where these settlers originally landed. Considered the 'Father of Sarasota,' Sir Gillespie's son, Scottish settler and real estate developer J.H. Gillespie, built the city's first hotel, established Florida's first golf course and served as the city's first mayor.

In the 1870s, Robert Rickford Roberts established a homestead farther south, in the current City of Venice. He planted an orange grove and a few other crops. In 1884, he sold a portion of its holdings to Frank Higel. The city acquired its present name in 1888 from Higel, considered the "Father of Venice," because of its likeness to the canal city in Italy where he spent his childhood. He turned the crop into a robust citrus operation, which branched off to boat builders, fisherman, grove caretakers, and contractors.

Overtown, Newtown & Beach Desegregation

For over 100 years, African American residents played a major role in the development of Sarasota. Black labor cleared snake-infested land for real estate developers, laid railroad ties, harvested celery, helped plat golf courses, and labored in the homes of Sarasota's influential power brokers cooking, cleaning, ironing and rearing children. Overtown was the first enclave or neighborhood established by Black people in Sarasota, though it has since been redeveloped into the Rosemary District. Newtown is the community that grew out of Overtown.

An organization named Newtown Alive! offers trolley tours and docent-led church visits along the southernmost point on the U.S. Civil Rights Trail, the "Newtown African American Heritage Trail." It is composed of 15 historical markers honoring the neighborhood's pioneers in education, medical care, entrepreneurship, and civil rights activism.

Founding Females

A city and its landmarks don't just form on their own. Five significant, and still-standing, organizations were formed because of the women behind the scenes. Mote Marine Laboratory, Booker Schools, Myakka River State Park, Marie Selby Botanical Gardens, and The Ringling Art Museum each have a story about women who used their voices to help form the origins of Sarasota and pave the way for the development of the city we love today.

Amish Go to the Beach, Too!

Amish and Mennonite Families first came to Sarasota in the 1920s and founded the community of Pinecraft. Their descendants and other families continue to live in the neighborhood during the winter months. Visitors will see them dressed in their plain clothing and riding tricycles in oversized baskets.

Between Beneva Road and Bahia Vista Street, this community offers 500 homes, a park, a craft village, and local favorites like Yoder's Amish Village, known for its pies, and Der Dutchman Restaurant.