

CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

HISTORY OF KISSIMEE AND THE LAKEFRONT



*Kissimmee Chain of Lakes and its relationship to South Florida.
Image Source: South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD)*

The history of the City of Kissimmee is inextricably linked to its location within the Kissimmee Chain of Lakes system. Scientists estimate that 125,000 years ago the St Johns River began its flow north to the Atlantic; at about the same time 40 miles west, the Kissimmee River began to flow south 80 miles to Lake Okeechobee.

The land in between the two rivers was low, flat marshland and home to a number of Native American communities. Early tribes used the name “Ays” for the Kissimmee River. Though there is debate about the origin of the name “Kissimmee”, historians reference a Spanish map that indicated that the name was “Cacema”. Much of the native population was wiped out by these first Spanish explorations to Florida and until the late to mid 1800s very few people lived far from Florida’s coasts. Central and southern Florida was primarily wilderness, which sheltered runaway African slaves and a few pockets of Creek tribes. The Creeks and the Africans intermingled and became a single people known today as the Seminoles. Many

places in Osceola County—especially Lake Tohopekaliga, which means “fort site” in Creek language—were important to the Seminoles and acted as places of refuge during the three Seminole Wars in the first half of the 19th century.

By the late 1850s a few dozen cattle families from nearby states had moved to the Kissimmee River Valley. The “line of settlement” was advanced by these families who needed the open land to graze their cattle, but few went south of Lake Tohopekaliga—with the exception of the settlements of Tampa Bay, the rest of south Florida was the last frontier in the United States east of the Mississippi. Osceola County was primary cattle country, and even played a role in the Civil War as the source of the Confederacy’s “Cow Cavalry”.

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Early photo of Kissimmee's public dock on Lake Tohopekaliga

Major development did not happen in the Kissimmee area until the 1880s. In 1880, there was a small outpost on Lake Tohopekaliga's northwest shore named Allendale. By 1884, this outpost had grown by the hundreds to become the existing City of Kissimmee. The growth can be credited to Philadelphian Hamilton Disston, who based his two-million acre drainage operation out of the small town. Disston, a shrewd businessman, contracted with the financially wobbly state of Florida to drain its southern lands. In return, Disston would own half of all the land he successfully drained. This deal made Disston the largest single landowner in the United States.

Disston's dredging and land speculation activities required a small steamboat industry to transport people and goods along the new waterway. The Kissimmee shipyard was responsible for building most of these steamships, which were just one jump ahead of civilization—with Kissimmee as the jumping off point. Concurrently, the South Florida Railroad was growing and extended the end of its line from Sanford down to Kissimmee, making the town on Lake Tohopekaliga a transportation hub of central Florida.

Kissimmee became a boomtown, where dozens of houses were under construction and people were sleeping in tents because the sawmills could not keep up with the demand for lumber. Wealthy land speculators came to town to scout for investments and lent an air of gentility to the frontier town. Historian Minnie Moore-Wilson, on her first railway trip to Kissimmee in the late 1880s remembered "Arriving on a belated train, no porters, no conveyances were in evidence; yet from the oil street lamps the little city, now numbering about 1,000 inhabitants, presented a picture of tropical beauty."¹

The heyday of Kissimmee, however, was short-lived. Expanding railroads began to challenge the steamships for cargo and passengers. By 1885, the South Florida Railroad extended its tracks again, this time all the way to Tampa. National forces were also at work; the Panic of 1893 was the worst depression that the United States had experienced to date and the stock market crashed due to speculation and unsound debt. The Panic ruined Disston, and his land sales headquarters closed its doors. Disaster struck again 1894 and 1895, when two hard citrus freezes obliterated local crops. Many of the people who been lured to Kissimmee for a better life just a decade earlier were lured further south to Miami where development was still happening, and freezes were rare. Even the steamship operations moved south to Lake Okeechobee in 1917. As a result, Kissimmee declined and returned to being a town where cattle was the primary industry.

With the exception of having an airfield during World War II, Kissimmee remained a largely agricultural community until the 1970s, when the development of Disney World changed the area's future. The resort spurred development along major arterials, especially US 17-92—and drained business out of Kissimmee's downtown. In 1978 a referendum approved a special tax that would revitalize the downtown, restore historic buildings, and build a marina on the lakefront. The City has made progress, but has not quite yet regained the economic prosperity that it saw in its heyday of the 1880s.

¹ Robison, 90

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The legacy of Kissimmee's golden era as the Disston headquarters is two-fold: the city has a charming historic downtown and an enviable location on Lake Tohopekaliga. Environmentally, however, the Disston operations set in motion an ecological quagmire. Though Disston dug a path for the water highway, the Kissimmee River's course remained roughly the same. Flooding problems in the 1950s and 1960s prompted the Corps of Engineers to spend \$32 million to divert 103 miles of the river into a 56-mile long canal. As a result, thousands of acres of wetlands were destroyed, fish died, and migratory birds began to disappear. Since the mid 1970s the state has pushed towards restoration of the system, but many of the system's lakes—including Lake Tohopekaliga—have undergone numerous drawdowns to try to rectify aquatic habitat and water quality. Although progress has been made, the area remains environmentally sensitive and Disston's legacy can be felt as far south as the Everglades.

History of Lakefront Park

The lakefront was the nexus of activity during Kissimmee's heyday as the jumping off point to the frontier: steamboats were built in its shipyard and chugged from its shores downriver to the Gulf of Mexico. At one point in the 1880s four docks jutted into Lake Tohopekaliga, including the first city dock at the foot of Ruby Avenue. This dock eventually evolved into the existing Yacht Club.

At the urging of the Kissimmee Beautification League, Lakefront Park was created in 1926 from 13 acres that the City purchased from the railroad. The land required a large amount of filling and bulkheading; aside from the land immediately



Lakefront Park in the 1950s or 1960s during a "Boatacade" event.

adjacent to the lake, the area was originally a flat woodland with saw palmetto and gallberry bushes. Over time the park has shifted in its recreation type from active (there was once a baseball field) to more passive activity. Interestingly, it has also served as the headquarters for outsider organizations such as the American Legion post and the Kissimmee All State Tourist club (KAST), which historically was an important center of civic activity—especially for the city's elderly.

In celebration of the beauty of the Kissimmee Chain of Lakes, local leader Dick Makinson founded the "Boatacade" in 1949. This event was a 4-day cruise and camping trip from the Kissimmee Lakefront down to Lake Okeechobee. By 1953 over 325 boats and 800 people made the 200-mile cruise, and the event gained national exposure and was held for many years.

Today the park is home to a growing collection of monuments and is a popular place to fish or just eat lunch overlooking the lake. It was also a popular place for bass fishing tournaments. The site feels somewhat disconnected from downtown despite its close proximity, but this is likely due to the fact that initially the lakefront was rather industrial in use and therefore somewhat noxious to the commerce and

residences of downtown. Now that the days of sawmills and shipyards are long-gone, there is an opportunity to connect downtown to the lake like never before.

POTENTIAL HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL INTERPRETATION

Lakefront Park is a perfect opportunity to celebrate Kissimmee's history. Current historic interpretation such as the Osceola County Historical Society's Pioneer Museum interpret Cracker culture and farm life, and the downtown streetscape design is a nod to the area's importance in Florida's cattle industry. However, there is very little in the City that tells residents and visitors the story of Kissimmee's boom period as the "jumping off point to the frontier". It is especially appropriate to celebrate this major point in the City's history at Lakefront Park, where much of the steamship and dredging operations were based.

Possible Thematic References:

The Disston Era

The decade of the 1880s was Kissimmee's true golden age when the City was the headquarters for Hamilton Disston's drainage operation—an event of statewide significance. It was also the decade when steamboats dominated the Kissimmee River, many of which were built and operated out of the lakefront on Lake Tohopekaliga.

Kissimmee Chain of Lakes

The dark underbelly of the Disston Era is that progress came at a cost. The environmental consequences of dredging the waterway and altering the south Florida ecosystem are still being felt and the ripple effect has reached as far as the Everglades. As a major component of the Chain of Lakes, Lake Tohopekaliga and its lakefront are opportunities for environmental education.

Physical Design References

Kissimmee is fortunate to have a large historic district of 189 contributing structures centered in its downtown. These buildings are documented and on file with the Florida Division of Historical Resources. While not on the actual Lakefront Park site, the structures provide context and examples of the local vernacular architecture. While these architectural styles do not have to necessarily be replicated in new park structures, the design of the park's details should be compatible with the City's historic aesthetic.



Example of historic downtown Kissimmee architecture

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