

Early Settlers Story

Long before man was collecting rock samples from the moon, the earliest inhabitants of the Space Coast spent their days hunting and fishing to survive. These early inhabitants were an ancient Indian tribe called the Ais (pronounced Ay-ess) who lived along the east coast of Florida from Cape Canaveral in the north to as far south as Fort Pierce.

Archaeological surveys, conducted during the early 1960s in the Kennedy Space Center and Cape Canaveral Air Force Station area, revealed remnants of Indian fishing sites, burial grounds, and Indian mounds that are hundreds or thousands of years old.

According to Mario Busacca, NASA Lead, planning and special projects with the Environmental Program Branch, there is evidence that the Ais Indians used an area called Futch Cove near the VIP Launch Viewing Site along the Banana River for a fishing camp. "Surveys revealed evidence of ancient hearths or fireplaces for cooking," said Busacca.

In 1513 Ponce de Leon arrived with three ships, in search of gold and glory. He landed along the coast and went ashore south of the Cape to replenish water and wood supplies. Not finding treasure, he sailed down the coast to the Florida Keys. He is credited with discovering Florida.

In 1562 a Frenchman named Jean Ribault sailed a fleet of French ships called the Ribault Fleet to the Cape area. During a tropical storm the ships were destroyed off the coast. Using what was left of the ships, Ribault and his men built and established Fort Caroline, near the area of the Space Shuttle launch pads. The French occupancy on the Cape was short-lived however. After learning from the Ais of the French presence, the Spanish in the north, led by Pedro Menendez de Aviles, sailed down the coast from St. Augustine and drove the French out of the area.

In 1565 Spanish forces moved south from St. Augustine and built a blockhouse at the northern tip of the Indian River. They also erected several fortifications on Cape Canaveral in hopes of protecting their trade routes from Spain to the new world. The buildings were abandoned a few months later after several unrelenting attacks by the Ais.

In 1763 the Treaty of Paris was signed and Florida became a British possession. After the Revolutionary War, Florida became a possession of the United States. The last naval battle of the Revolutionary War was actually fought about 72 miles southeast of Cape Canaveral.

During a NASA survey, evidence of a fort known as Fort Ann was discovered. The fort was one of 200 forts constructed in Florida during the

second Seminole War. Fort Ann, located near the old Haulover Canal, was a three-sided stockade that backed up to the Indian River. According to David Paterno, a retired dean at Keiser College who is researching and compiling information on Florida forts, writings reveal that Fort Ann was built in December 1837 and used through April 1838 by U.S. soldiers and the Navy to help drive the Seminoles south or capture them.

“It was a unique fort because troops could arrive by land or water, it served as a main supply fort for food and forage to U.S. troops at Ft. Pierce and Ft. Jupiter and troops were actually garrisoned there,” said Paterno. Although not confirmed, the Fort may have also been used by Union troops during the Civil War.

In the 1840s, the first group of American settlers to establish a permanent residence on Cape Canaveral came from Georgia and the Carolinas. They were primarily of English and Scottish-Irish heritage. These tough settlers survived the scorching heat, hordes of mosquitos and scrub environment to make the Cape their home.

The first Cape Canaveral Lighthouse was constructed between 1843 and 1847 to help guide ships away from the shoals and rocks along the coastline. The whale oil it used as the light-burning source did very little to guide ships away from danger. During the Civil War the lighthouse was dismantled and buried in an orange grove, according to local researcher, historian and author of History of Cape Canaveral and The Early Settlers, Rose Wooley.

After the war a larger (28 feet in diameter) and taller (165 feet) lighthouse was constructed that burned kerosene for its light source. In 1892 it was moved inland one mile from the Atlantic shore to its present location to save it from storm erosion.

“Many of the early settlers and their descendants served as lighthouse keepers through the years. Oscar Floyd Quarterman was the last lighthouse keeper, from 1929 to 1939, until the Coast Guard took responsibility. Quarterman died in 1951 and is buried at Georgiana Cemetery on Merritt Island,” said Wooley.

In 1868 Merritt Island, originally settled by Douglas D. Dummitt in 1828, saw an influx of settlers. The primary way of life was agriculture, including citrus, pineapple and avocado groves and sugar cane plantations. Cattle were also raised on the island. Today a large portion of the original Dummitt orange groves are still located on KSC property. Merritt Island has never been incorporated as a city.

In 1885, the U.S. Census listed seven families living on Cape Canaveral. By 1910, the number was nine. By 1939 there were about 120 people living in the area of Cape Canaveral and on Merritt Island.

In 1893, the Flagler Railway reached the city of Titusville, formerly called Sand Point, at the northern end of Brevard County.

In the 1920s a few more families arrived at the Cape; the area still remained isolated and accessible only by boat. Though there were no roads, several small villages emerged in the area; the remains of some are still evident today. Mail was delivered by boat.

Artesia was located at the extreme south end of the Cape. It was abandoned and then destroyed when Port Canaveral was constructed.

The Stinkmore Settlement was located at the Cape's southeast shoreline near present day Launch Complex 17 and very near Launch Pad 5 where America's first astronaut was launched. Stinkmore had a fishing pier and dock that stretched close to 300 feet into the Atlantic Ocean.

DeSoto Beach was located in the vicinity of present day Launch Complex 36. It featured 15 permanent homes, a small hotel, a store and even a brothel.

Other settlements included Orsino, which was located in the present day KSC Industrial Complex area, Wilson's Corners and Sunrise Beach, a small community that included the present day astronaut beach house.

In the late 1940s, after Cape Canaveral was selected as the first U.S. long range missile proving ground, the U.S. government began condemning and purchasing private property on Cape Canaveral. Some residents were moved to the Brevard Hotel in Cocoa temporarily during hazardous launch operations. Others refused to leave, and after exhausting appeals in court, they were removed and the military assumed sole occupancy of Cape Canaveral.

The existing homes and buildings were converted into storage areas and offices. The hotel at DeSoto Beach was converted and housed the first headquarters building.

Today, all the buildings are gone. Only remnants remain including numerous preserved grave sites, scattered orange groves, gardens, and of course, the historic Cape Canaveral Lighthouse.

In 1973, an environmental assessment and archaeological survey was done in the area of the Shuttle Landing Facility (SLF) prior to construction. According to Steve Harris, NASA chief of the Field Engineering Office and project manager for the SLF, "Three significant prehistoric Indian mounds were

discovered close to the area. One on the far west side of the Banana Creek where it empties into the Indian River, one south of the Saturn V Exhibit Center, and one near the road that leads to the Mate/Demate device.” The survey also revealed remnants of building structures and orange groves from inhabitants in the early 1900s.

Historians have recorded our past down through the ages. Hundreds of years from now they will reveal to future generations the Kennedy Space Center story and the evolution of human spaceflight.