

Brevard County Natural Resources Management Office Environmental Field Station

For Brevard County, the Colonial Period began in 1513 when Ponce deLeon landed just south of Cape Canaveral. The Spanish initiated the cultivation of citrus in Florida which has had a significant impact on the landscape and economy of the area.

Aside from early exploration, little settlement occurred for the next 300 years. The outbreak of the Seminole Indian War in 1835 stimulated the first significant development. Land was cleared, and trails were built. Conditions were primitive and settlers few. An increase in settlers did occur over the next twenty years, however, in the City Point/Cocoa area. As the twentieth century approached, transportation consisted of steamboats on the Indian River, as well as railroad connections. At the same time, the citrus industry along the river began to prosper and provide jobs.

It was during the late 1880's that the need for churches of various faiths became apparent.

In March 1885, a meeting was held at the City Point School and it was decided to take action and build a building for church and school purposes. Land was secured on the Indian River in an area known as City Point, which was located between Sand Point (Titusville) and what would later be known as Cocoa (1913). A warranty deed is on record in Brevard County dated November 7, 1885 in the names of William H. Sharpe, George W. Holmes, A.S. Hatch, John M. Sanders, and George E. Chester, the trustees of the new church and schoolhouse.

Dr. C.A. Hentz, a physician who resided in City Point, wrote in his autobiography regarding the formation of the church, that on November 15, 1885 the first services were performed in the new church and schoolhouse. Reverend R. Weir (probably a supply pastor) conducted the first services. His autobiography goes on to describe several of the men that were pastors to this congregation in 1886, 1887, and 1889, when the congregation built another larger church in Cocoa. One of the pastors, Reverend Bolton (1887), lived with Dr. Hentz for four years.

Brevard County continued to produce enormous amounts of citrus until the disastrous freeze of 1895 which devastated the industry statewide. In 1892, work was begun on the Cape Canaveral Lighthouse. Settlers continued to trickle in, but it was not until the last half of the 19th century that a real influx of settlers occurred. This was a direct result of the Homestead Act of 1862 offering free land for farmers and speculators. The Indian River offered fish, game, and an easy means of local transportation.

The first homes in the County were palmetto shacks which were later replaced by rustic log cabins. Simple frame construction appeared in the early 1800's. The City Point Community Church was constructed in Gothic vernacular. It's tall, narrow profile and landscaping of native hardwoods is typical of late 1800 Florida architecture. The hardwood hammocks along the shore of the Indian River were used during this early construction, the lumber being milled in Sand Point (Titusville) and rafted up and down

the river for building homes situated along the banks of the river in such communities as Cocoa, Eau Gallie, and Melbourne.

It is known that the building served as a school at one time for the Sharpes/City Point area. Until the mid 1950's it served as community center, and as a voting precinct until the November 6, 1956 elections when the voting place was moved to the Four Communities Fire Station in City Point. Over the years, several other religious denominations have met in the City Point Community Church.

On top of the roof of the church is what appears to be a bell tower. It is known to have housed a beacon light and functioned as a lighthouse. Throughout World War II, German U-boats trolled the Florida Coastline. Spotters were trained to staff observation towers and watch for German submarines and torpedoed freighters, as well as enemy aircraft. A stairway, located on the north side of the church which has been removed, was used to reach the steeple.

On October 31, 1979, Charles E. Williams, sole surviving Trustee, deeded the property and church building to Brevard County for "school, church, and community purposes." In 1987, the Brevard County Natural Resources Management Office became interested in the use of this building because of its proximity to the Indian River, the wetlands behind the building, and its availability as an educational tool. During the later half of 1987 and the spring of 1988, the County renovated the building.

In order to facilitate public access and use of the building, a city water line was installed and a septic tank was buried on the south side of the building. A restroom was installed in a small room just inside the front door. Outdoor sanitary facilities remain behind the building and have not been renovated. Ceiling fans and adequate lighting fixtures were installed, and the electrical wiring brought up to code. The original electric wiring was left intact. Part of the floor in the pulpit area was replaced. A rotted structure behind the church was removed from the property.

The building sits on a coquina stone foundation, typical for most construction of this timeframe. The windowsills and wood sashes were replaced as needed. The galvanized roof was wire brushed and repainted. The whole outside of the building was sandblasted and repainted in white with gray trim. The building still retains the appearance of a church, and is frequently referred to as "the church."

The Brevard County Natural Resources Management Office titled the building the "Environmental Field Station." An official opening was held on June 24, 1988 with an Open House attended by many local officials, environmentalists, and other interested citizens of the County. Since it's renovation, the building which is located directly across the street from the Indian River, has been utilized as a meeting place by various organizations and an educational field station for the Natural Resources Management Office. Grade school classes and 4-H groups participate in environmental education workshops that include a firsthand look at nature. The Field Station currently houses several types of nature exhibits.

The natural beauty surrounding the building has been retained and enhanced. Massive oak trees, their branches heavy with Spanish moss, can be found on the property and in the wetland area behind the building. A butterfly garden featuring native plants has been added and many native orchids, ferns, and wildflowers can be seen throughout the site.

For further information, contact the Brevard County Natural Resources Management Office at (321) 633-2016.