

blew the water out of Tampa Bay, exposing large sand flats, during the backwash stage.¹⁴ The entire barrier island chain from Pinellas south to Captiva and Sanibel flooded when the Gulf of Mexico's waters rose 14.3 feet above normal. The hurricane's storm surge reshaped Pinellas's barrier island chain. It carved out two new inlets, washed away some keys, and built up others with sands dredged from both land and sea. Although the mainland escaped such punishment, two-thirds of the Pinellas Peninsula experienced heavy flooding. Fortunately, in 1848 Pinellas's barrier islands were uninhabited, and only a few hardy settlers lived on the mainland's higher elevations.¹⁵

Three centuries earlier, the first white men came to the Pinellas Peninsula on an ill-fated Spanish expedition headed by Pánfilo de Narváez. Although only Cabeza de Vaca and three others returned from this voyage, Narváez had four hundred men when he reached Tampa Bay on April 4, 1528. Three days later the explorers landed on one of Pinellas's southernmost barrier islands, near present-day Pass-à-Grillé. They splashed ashore across a wide expanse of open beach with unspoiled dune systems and thick clusters of mangroves. As they made their way to the mainland, the Spaniards encountered a primeval pine forest. They called their new discovery *punta pinal*, or pine point. It came to be known as Pinellas.¹⁶

The expedition trailed north and encountered a lush hardwood forest in the central portion of the peninsula, but the trek ended when the visitors encountered the mosquitoes that swarmed around Pinellas's freshwater swamps, creeks, and uplands. A host of wildlife lived in this varied environment, including bears, Florida panthers, deer, turkeys, and bald eagles. In immense offshore rookeries, such large wading birds as snowy egrets and roseate spoonbills flourished. The waters in and around the peninsula teemed with tarpon, bass, pompano, trout, mullet, redfish, and grouper. Shellfish—stone crabs, clams, oysters, scallops, and shrimp—also flourished in the local waters.¹⁷

After failing to discover any gold in their trek across the lower Pinellas Peninsula, Narváez and his disgruntled soldiers left the region to search for gold elsewhere. In 1567 Pedro Menendez de Avilés led another expedition through Tampa Bay, and these conquistadores fared no better in their search for mineral riches than their predecessors had. Menendez, the founder of St. Augustine, felt the area held some strategic importance and left behind a small garrison settlement. Two years later missionaries visited the site, but they were unable to find any signs of their countrymen. Although the Spanish constructed no permanent settlements, they left a dire legacy. The diseases they brought with them decimated the local Native American population; when other Europeans came to the area in the 1840s, they found only traces of human occupancy.¹⁸

In 1870, fewer than fifty families occupied the peninsula.¹⁹ These early settlers, together with itinerant lumberjacks and hunters, harvested many of the region's resources. Large stands of pines, cypress, and hardwood trees were either cut for lumber or cleared for pasture and cultivation. Organized hunting parties systematically eliminated the peninsula's two largest predators, the black bear and the Florida panther, because they threatened the region's growing herds of cattle. Plume hunters, seeking to profit from America's millinery fashions, killed thousands of wading birds and pushed these species toward extinction.²⁰

In 1880 only twenty-five of Pinellas's three hundred inhabitants lived on the southern portion of the peninsula.²¹ Roads were practically nonexistent, and trips to Tampa were made almost exclusively by boat. There was only one commercial establishment, a small general store with less than \$200 worth of merchandise. Despite these crude conditions, the settlers had laid the foundation for a prospering citrus industry. In addition, large herds of cattle grazed in the central and southern portions of the peninsula, and a few small commercial fishing operations mined the bountiful coastal waters.²² While these pursuits provided a livelihood for the peninsula's early pioneers, the first indication that Pinellas could attract wealth came in 1885 at the American Medical Association's annual meeting. In a paper delivered to the full convention, W. C. Van Bibber declared that south Pinellas offered the ideal location for a "Health City."²³

Ten years earlier, a group of English doctors had broached the idea of constructing such a city, and in the early 1880s they hired Van Bibber to find a site. After a year of research, he recommended that his clients purchase land on the southern portion of Pinellas, which he called Point Pinellas, where broad beaches stretched for miles. The region possessed a "peculiar, healthy climate" as attested to by its "natural products, the ruddy appearance of its few inhabitants" and its average winter temperature of 72 degrees. With "little upon its soil but primal forests," Van Bibber wrote, "there is a large subpeninsula, Point Pinellas, waiting for the hand of improvement." Although funding for the project collapsed, Van Bibber's findings set the tone for future generations of planners and city builders.²⁴

Florida's First City Planning Experiment

City building on the Pinellas Peninsula began with the completion of the Orange Belt Railway in 1888. This narrow-gauge railroad ran the length of the peninsula, passing through Tarpon Springs, Dunedin, Clearwater, and Largo