

SUGARLOAF KEY'S HISTORIC RESOURCES

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Throughout the history of Sugarloaf Key, people have created and left behind a number of historic sites and structures. Some have survived; others have perished.

Native American settlement on the island is evidenced by a midden — or shell heap — on the gulfside of Upper Sugarloaf, facing Cudjoe Key.

This area drew the first white settlement, too. The 1850 census notes Jonathan Thompson and two other men there, growing tropical fruits and sweet potatoes. Non-agricultural supplies had to be brought in from Key West.

By the 1890s, J. Vining Harris, who built the Southernmost House in Key West, owned extensive areas of Lower Sugarloaf and had a wooden house there. In 1909, he sold some of this land to Charles and George Chase, who pioneered efforts to grow sponges in Sugarloaf Sound. Soon, the community of Chase sprung up, with a post office, houses and work buildings. None of these structures survive. The Sugarloaf Lodge stands in the area today.

The building of the Overseas Railroad, which reached Key West in 1912, created the right-of-way and concrete-arch bridges still remaining. The latter include the Lower Sugarloaf Channel Bridge connecting the Saddlebunch Keys with Lower Sugarloaf, the Park Channel Bridge connecting Park Key with Upper Sugarloaf and the Bow Channel Bridge connecting Upper Sugarloaf with Cudjoe.

World War I wound up having a significant influence on Sugarloaf, as the financial instability brought about by the war drove the Chase Brothers' sponge operation into bankruptcy.

By 1927, the first Overseas Highway opened on Sugarloaf, known as Old State Road 4A, running along the oceanside of the island. The drive to Key West took about an hour with wooden bridges crossing the gaps. The right-of-way still exists: The route between Sugarloaf Key KOA campground and Sugarloaf Boulevard can be explored on foot or by bike, while the portion southwest of Sugarloaf Boulevard is still a functioning roadway.

Also in the 1920s, Richter Clyde Perky bought land, formerly owned by the Chase brothers, personally financing the building of what is now Sugarloaf Boulevard to connect his property with the highway on the oceanside. Additionally, he renamed the community Perky and resumed efforts to grow sponges in Sugarloaf Sound.

Perky wanted to create a retreat as well, but was plagued by mosquitoes. Consequently, he contacted a San Antonio, Texas, physician, who had developed a prototypical tower to house insect-eating bats. Perky's property manager, Fred Johnson, built the 35-foot-high wood-frame structure in 1929, but no bats could be induced to take up residence within. This landmark still stands on Airport Road, a pioneering example of an attempt to use biological methods to control pests. It is now listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

In 1930, tourism came to the area, when a manufacturer from Massachusetts, C. Irving Wright, founded Pirates Cove Fishing Camp on the oceanside of Upper Sugarloaf, where guests lodged

in small cabins. The complex straddled Old State Road 4A — not too far from where the KOA campground is today.

While a terrible hurricane in 1935 struck the Upper Keys, its effects reached Sugarloaf, too: The storm put the railroad out of business forever and severely damaged Pirates Cove. In the following years, the railway right-of-way and bridges were acquired for the new Overseas Highway, while Pirates Cove was rebuilt on a smaller scale. By 1938, the new road opened, and a Depression-era guidebook described Pirates Cove as "one of the best known resorts on the Lower Keys." Not to be outdone, Perky opened his own tourist establishment, Perky Lodge, in 1939.

Both Pirates Cove and Perky Lodge, however, suffered severe setbacks during the following decade: In 1943, a fire destroyed the houses of both Perky and Johnson, while a hurricane in 1948 destroyed Pirates Cove.

Surviving buildings on Sugarloaf date mostly from the 1930s and '40s: Mangrove Mama's at 19991 Overseas Highway (gulfside) is a frame vernacular, one-story building with a hip roof. Although much altered over the years, it is a well-known and highly visible example of roadside commercial building.

Less familiar are the houses — all frame-vernacular one-story residences with gable roofs. At 71 Johnson Road, the eaves face the street with a shed-roof porch extending across part of the facade — an arrangement featured elsewhere on Sugarloaf. Next door, 81 Johnson Road has the gable facing the street, with an attached front porch, similar to many houses in Key West.

Indian Mound subdivision (gulfside) has the greatest concentration of historic houses. Five of them have eaves parallel to the street with a partial-length front porch covered by a shed roof: 19572, 19582 and 19591 Aztec Dr., 19674 Indian Mound Dr. and 19583 Seminole St. Some of these houses still have historic metal-shingle roofs, while others have more modern V-crimp. Fenestration — the presence of windows in a building or other structure — now consists mostly of metal-awning windows, although a few historic wood sashes are still in evidence. Some of the porches are open, others have screens, and still others are enclosed.

A handful of houses in Indian Mound Estates are more individualistic: 19580 Mayan St. and 19520 Tequesta St. do not have front porches, while 19616 Aztec Dr., 19556 Navajo St. and 19658 Seminole St. do. Some of these also still have wood double-hung windows.

Historic houses on Date Palm Drive have fared less well. Two from the 1940s have recently been lost, while one remaining — a 19th century house moved from Key West — was flooded by Hurricane Wilma in 2005.

The transformation of Sugarloaf Key can be traced from a rural outpost to a modern suburb by studying its history and appreciating the tangible remains of its past.

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