OLD CITY HALL, HOME OF BOCA RATON HISTORICAL SOCIETY
Jeanne Nixon Baur, Artist

A report to the membership of
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There were formerly two Boca Ratones, one in Dade County and the other in Palm Beach County. The Dade County site, now called Indian Creek, was the original Boca Raton and appeared on maps in the late sixteenth century. From the late 1500s to the 1820s the Palm Beach County Boca Raton was known as Rio Seco or Dry River. By 1822 this waterway and three associated lakes were known as Boca Ratones Sound. This was eventually shortened to Boca Raton by the late nineteenth century, and gave a name to the town of Boca Raton before 1924.

Associated with the present Lake Boca Raton is an inlet from the Atlantic Ocean. This inlet has changed positions at least three times in the past two hundred years. In the late 1760s the inlet was at the northeastern corner of the lake. By the 1800s this inlet had closed and another opened on the southeastern corner. Both of these were closed as much as open due to drifting sands. In 1926 the present Boca Raton Inlet was dredged.

Stories of pirates hiding in the modern Lake Boca Raton and other ships using it as safe refuge are not true. These stories were borrowed, as was the name Boca Raton, from the Dade County Site.
The Legends

According to local legend the "laguna de boca ratones" or "Boca de Ratones" was used during the early period of Florida history as a haven for pirates and other dangerous characters (lineham, 1973). These stories flourished during the early 1900s but recently have appeared less often.

Among the tales frequently told are those that Captain Edward Teach, usually called Blackbeard, regularly anchored in Lake Boca Raton between raids on merchant ships (wisehart, 1973). He is said to have buried his treasure somewhere in the sands of Boca Raton. The story is even told that Blackbeard's ghost, sometimes said to have buried his treasure somewhere in the sands of Boca Raton between raids on merchant ships (Wisehart, 1973). He is but recently have appeared less often.

For long periods of time the term "hauling inlet" has been used for shallow water sites where boats had to be physically dragged or hauled through. In an inlet noted for its shallow rocky nature one might expect the name "hauling inlet."

Although the evidence is still highly circumstantial, there seems to be more support for the third translation or "thieves inlet." During the sixteenth century when the name "Boca Raton" appeared, at least eight groups of Europeans visited upper Biscayne Bay after Ponce de Leon's voyage of 1513. These of these, in the 1560s, are particularly pertinent. In 1565 Menendez sent a ship north which was seized by mutineers and sailed south. A storm caught them and forced them to shelter in Biscayne Bay. To their surprise, they found a village of white men (Bacca, 1723). Both of these groups of Europeans apparently contained lawbreakers such as mutineers and thieves.

During the same period in 1567, Brother Villareal was left by Menendez to establish a mission with the Tequesta Indians on upper Biscayne Bay. His report of the Indians is little different from those almost two centuries later (Alana, 1743) of the same village. These Spanish priests were less than pleased with the Indians' behavior and make reference to their practices of stealing (McNicol, 1941). Probably Brother Villareal or his military companions originated the name of the site "Boca Raton" or "thieves inlet."

The Sites

(A). The first map to label a site with the name "Boca Raton" was apparently prepared in the last part of the sixteenth century. This map is anonymous and undated but historians have suggested that it was drawn between 1550 and 1600 (Anon., 1550-1600). By the eighteenth century when Padre Alana and his group settled on the Miami River to try to start another mission, the name "Boca Raton" was well established (Alana, 1743). Each of these early maps shows the position of the inlet near 25°48'N in what is now known as Miami Beach.

Among the next maps to use the name "Boca Raton" were those by Jefferys (1763), Gibson (1763), and Kitchen (1765). These three maps do not label a single name; the latter two were perhaps copied from Jeffery's. All label a site "Boca de Ratones" near latitude 26°15'N. This latitude is undoubtedly in error since many of the Jeffery's maps were off by about one degree. Subsequent maps by Jefferys call the site near that latitude "Raton" (Jefferys, 1768) and "Ratones" (Jefferys, 1772). In fact most of the maps of the late half of the 1700s label the site on upper Biscayne Bay with "Boca Ratones" or some variant of that name (Puente, 1768; DeBrahm, 1770, 1772; Romans, 1775; Sayer & Bennett, 1776; Sartine, 1780; Anon., 1786; Sinibaldo, 1791; Anon., 1792; Purcell, 1792).

Some of the maps drawn during the nineteenth century call the same site "Boca Raton," but others substitute other names or place "Boca Raton" at other locations. DeBrahm (1765 fide Chardon, 1795) was apparently the first to call the inlet at 25°48'N the "White
Inlet." This name was continued by Stork (1767) and by Jefferys (1766) in the map he drew for the third edition of Stork's book. While Inlet appears on a variety of later maps (Cary, 1806; Darby, 1821; Lucas, 1822, 1823; Buchon, 1825; Hinton, et al., 1832; Illman & Pilbrow, 1837).

Bahamians seem to be responsible for the origin of the name "Bear Cut" (Chardon, 1795) which Romans (1775) placed at the inlet north of Key Biscayne. Vignoles (1823) confused this inlet with the original Boca Raton and labeled it "Bear Cut or Boca Ratones." This inlet has the Baudamant name "Boca Ratones" to this site and later maps followed them (Bruff, 1846; Ives, 1856). Eventually this became known as "Norris Cut" and the name "Boca Raton" was entirely lost in the Biscayne area.

Our modern Boca Raton, a lake and inlet associated with the city of Boca Raton in Palm Beach County, appeared with a different name in the late 1500s and early 1600s. The name of the site at 25°2VN on the early maps was "Rio Seco" (Anon., 1550-1600; Anon., 1630; Jansson, 1642, 1650; Sanson, 1656, 1657, 1679, 1683). This name persisted for the same locality through the 1700s (Anon., 1786; Sinibaldo, 1791; Anon., 1792; Purcell, 1792). The name even appears in the 1800s (Vignoles, 1823; Tanner, 1823; Anon., 1834), but most later maps translate the name into the English "Dry Inlet" (d'Anville, 1794; Cary, 1806; Darby, 1821; Lucas, 1822, 1823; Buchon, 1825; Hinton et al., 1832; Illman & Pilbrow, 1837).

It was not until the 1820s that the inlet at 26°21'N became known as "Boca Ratone" (Vignoles, 1823; Tanner, 1823; Hood, 1838; MacKay & Blake, 1839; Mackay, 1845; Bruff, 1846; Ives, 1856; Williams, 1837; Burr, 1838; MacKay & Blake, 1839; U.S.G.S., 1971). At the same time Vignoles (1823) confused these two sites when he gave the original Boca Ratones at 25°48'N the new name of "Indian Creek." This Indian Creek persists for the same locality through the 1700s (Poinsett, 1838; MacKay & Blake, 1839; Bruff, 1846; Ives, 1856). At present the lake and inlet continue to be called "Boca Raton" and a town by that name was incorporated in 1924.

Bernard Romans (1775) gave one of the most complete early comments on conditions at the Boca Raton inlet and lake at 26°21'N. In the directions to navigators in the appendix to his book, Romans (1775: 243) made the following comments: "The mouth of Rio Seco.....is very seldom open, having a narrow bar of dry sand before it, [and] the coast forms here a small kind of cove...."

Later Ives (1856) made reference to Lake Boca Ratones and the waterway for ten miles to the north which he called the Little Hillsboro. This stream was difficult to pass in the first six miles below Lake Worth, but became a respectable waterway below Orange Grove Haulover (now southern Delray Beach between Atlantic Avenue and Germantown Road). From this haulover to Lake Boca Ratones, a distance of about seven miles, the stream increased in width. In the first two miles the increase was from seven to fifty feet in width, and at the same time it passed two lakes (known as Lake Woman and Lake Woman, which were unnamed at the time) and reached Lake Boca Raton it was one hundred feet wide. The southern two-thirds of this stream was renamed the "Spanish River Lagoon" some time after the turn of the century (Long, 1921). No one appears to know when this change took place or when it was shortened to the modern "Spanish River" but the last change was before the 1930s (Find, 1931; Butler, 1939). Spanish River was fresh in the late 1700s and was so indicated by Romans (1775). The region continued to be labeled as "fresh marsh" into the 1820s (Vignoles, 1823; Tanner, 1823). Ives (1856), who described the expedition of Captain Wade in 1842, said that most of the passage from Orange Grove Haulover south was dominated by sawgrass marsh, indicating fresh water. Charles Pierce lived in the Orange Grove House of Refuge (in the present city of Delray Beach) for part of the period between 1876 and 1890 (Pierce, 1870; Pierce makes a point of recording that this portion of the Spanish River was freshwater sawgrass marsh even during the low water regime of winter.

Today Spanish River is virtually non-existent (Austin, 1976). Condominiums sit on most of the river at the Boca Raton and Highlands Beach border. Those parts of the river between the lakes in Boca Raton (both channelized since 1890; Handbury, 1906). One small portion of the river less than a quarter-mile long remains on the west side of the Intracoastal Canal north of the forty-fifth street bridge in Boca Raton, but a public park named the "Spanish River Park" is the most obvious reminder that the waterway once existed.

Of Lake Boca Ratones Ives (1856) said that it was a "sheet of water.....a mile and a half wide and three-quarters of a mile long. The sand bank which separates it from the sea is in one place only a hundred yards wide." No open inlet had been recorded since 1822 for this lake and even Romans (1775) said that the lake was rarely connected to the sea. Ives (1856) said "here there was once an inlet." According to him the timbers of an old wrecked ship were still lying partially buried in what was the former inlet. The Indian scouts for the army survey party forming the basis for Ives's Military Map reported that the wrecked ship had drifted onto the bar "many years ago" and was left there by the receding tide. Sand collecting around the skeleton of the ship had closed the inlet.

The original inlet to Lake Boca Raton was located, as it had been seen by DeBrahm (1773) and Romans (1775), on the northeastern side of the lake. Some time before the 1820s, presumably near the 1759 hurricane (Romans, 1775) or later, another inlet opened on the southeastern side of the lake. By 1822 this inlet was closed (Vignoles, 1823) and remained closed for several years (Baldwin & Cradock, 1834; MacKay, 1845; Williams, 1870; Pierce, 1870-1890 in 1970; Barbour, 1883; U.S.G.S., 1884). Most of the inlets between Jupiter and Biscayne Bay have opened and closed many times in the past one to two hundred years (DeBrahm, 1773; Romans, 1775; Ives, 1856; Corse, 1939). Many inlets, such as the one in Boca Raton, would be closed now if they were not dredged periodically.
Few records are available for the Boca Raton Inlet between the 1890s and 1920s. One of the few was published by Harshberger (1914) and the inlet was still closed. Records in the Public Works Department of the City of Boca Raton show that the city had dredged the old 1820s inlet by 1925. This channel opened 1000 feet south of the modern inlet. In 1926 a new channel was dug east through the dune to form the present opening. Large areas of beach front were filled to the south and much of the modern Cabana Club sits on the 1926 beach fill.

The Solution

How can the stories of pirates and storm shelter be true for a lake and inlet closed most of the time? We believe this is a case of confusion between the two Boca Ratones. The southern Boca Raton was only one of several entrances to Biscayne Bay and pirates are known to have used various parts of the bay. Black Caesar's Rock on the southern part of the bay is one of the most famous localities (Morris, 1974). Caesar, a former Negro slave, was a lieutenant to Blackbeard (Anon., 1939), and Blackbeard figures prominently in the legends of Boca Raton. Biscayne Bay is also known to have provided protection against hurricanes (Barcia, 1723; Douglas, 1947).

The conclusion must be drawn that the modern Boca Raton not only received its name from the south, but also many or all of the legends. Evidence from historical records (inter alia Barcia (1723) for the Spanish period; DeBrahm (1773) and Romans (1775) for the English period; Ives (1856) and Pierce (1970) for the American period) shows that the southeastern coast north of Biscayne Bay was sparsely inhabited. There is a long history of wreckers and pirates on Biscayne Bay (Douglas, 1947; Morris, 1974). With the movement of people up and down the coast stories must have been related, and often as not, confused and changed. Since there were two Boca Ratones between the 1820s and 1850s it is easy to see how stories from one could be transferred to the other.

Acknowledgments

Assistance of various kinds was provided during this study by the following people: Louis Arana (National Monument, St. Augustine), C.H. Arnade (University of South Florida, Tampa), R.E. Chardon (Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge), Eugene Lyon (Consulting Historian for St. Augustine Restoration, Inc.), B.W. Linton (Bureau of State Lands, Department of Natural Resources, Tallahassee), Arva Parks (Historical Association of Southern Florida, Miami), M.C. Resnick (Florida Atlantic University, Boca Raton). Maps have been examined from the Library of Congress (Washington, D.C.), the P.K. Yonge Collection (University of Florida, Gainesville), and the Florida Historical Society Collection (University of South Florida, Tampa).

References Cited


Ives, J.C. 1856. "Memoir to accompany a military map of the peninsula of Florida south of Tampa Bay." War Department, New York.


Cartography

The following annotated list of maps examined includes names at or near A-26°21'N and B-25°48'N. Only maps cited in the text are included.


Alana 1743. Cayos de los Martyres. from the Cartografia de Ultramar, Plate 52, with the legend "Boca de Ratones, sacada por el Padre Joseph Samer de Alana. Año 1743. Que fue el 22 de Junio, con su compan? el Pº Monaco a la ceremonia de aquellos Indios." B-Boca Raton.


Jefferys 1768. Pais Cedes, Sheet II, Containing the Peninsula & Gulf of Florida, with the Bahama Islands. Lowery 519, p. 351. P.K. Yonge 61, from a photocopy in Library of Congress. A-Rio Seco; B-Boca de Ratones; Pueblo de Indios; Raton; Cayo Bizcayno.


Jefferys 1769. East Florida from Surveys made since the last Peace, etc. In: Stork, W. A description of East Florida, with a journal kept by John Bartram, etc. 3rd edition. Photocopy from Library of Congress. A-New Inlet; B-White Inlet.


d'Anville 1794. A new and complete map of the West Indies comprehending all the coasts and Islands known by that name. London. A-Dry Inlet.

Cary 1806. A New Map of part of the United States of North America, containing the Carolinas and Georgia, also the Floridas and part of the Bahama Islands &c. 1 Feb., London. A-Dry Inlet; B-White Inlet.


Lucas 1823. Florida. See: Phillips P. 742, item 76. A-Dry Inlet; B-White Inlet.


Tanner 1823. Map of Florida, No. 22 In: A new American Atlas, etc. Philadelphia. A-Boca Ratones, Rio Seco or Dry River Inlet now (1822) shut; B-Indian Creek Inlet now (1822) shut; Bear Cut.


Mitchell 1834. Map of Florida according to the latest authorities. Philadelphia. P.K. Yonge 815. A-Sharkstail R. (later became the Hillsboro River and was not really the same as Rio Seco); B-R. Ratones.


Tanner 1839. Florida. Philadelphia. A-Potomac R. (later became the Hillsboro River); B-Rio Ratones; Bear Cut.


MacKay & Blake 1839. Map of the seat of war in Florida. Washington. Photocopy from Department of Natural Resources, Tallahassee. (Also known as Taylor Map). A-Boca Raton Sound; B-Boca Ratones (shown at cut N. of Virginia Key).


Butler 1939. Plat of Section 9 and part of Section 4, Township 47S, Range 43E. by Geo. O. Butler. Copy from Boca Raton City Hall. A-Spanish River.
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