

Port Leon

GPS Coordinates:
84°8.892' W ~ 30° 9.099' N



Free-blown glass bottle (Courtesy Florida Division of Historical Resources, Bureau of Archaeological Research)

The years prior to Florida becoming a state on March 3, 1845, saw several towns – Rock Haven, St. Marks, Magnolia, Port Leon, and New Port – rise and fall along the St. Marks River. Each strove to gain an economic advantage over each other. Thousands of cotton bales from south Georgia and north Florida were shipped from these ports.

St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge History Trail

1	Wakulla Beach: site of Wakulla Beach Hotel and West Goose Creek Seheyard	84°15.703' W	30° 6.316' N	4	Mounds Station: site of Shell Mounds and Naval Stores	84° 9.869' W	30° 5.282' N
2	Plum Orchard: site of Port Leon	84°8.892' W	30° 9.099' N	5	St. Marks Lighthouse: site of Lighthouse, Ft. Williams, and Spanish Hole/Shipwreck	84° 10.955' W	30° 4.658' N
3	East River: site of CCC and Salt Works	84°8.710' W	30° 7.797' N	6	Mandalay: site of Aucilla River	83° 58.769' W	30° 6.985' N



Port Leon

Port Leon, created in 1837, was located on the east side of the St. Marks River, about two miles below the confluence of the Wakulla and St. Marks Rivers and downstream from St. Marks and Magnolia.

Mule-drawn rail cars moved goods between Tallahassee and St. Marks over a railroad completed in 1836. A drawbridge built in 1839 over the St. Marks River near the old Spanish Fort extended the line to Port Leon.

Lots began selling in 1838, with advertisements declaring Port Leon to be "...handsomely located on the most elevated site on the bay... beyond the influence of the highest tides." That statement proved to be devastatingly inaccurate.



*Port Leon in its heyday
(Courtesy State Archives of Florida)*

The town was incorporated in 1841 and named the county seat when Wakulla County was formed on March 11, 1843. About 200 citizens were served by a hotel, two taverns, general stores, a newspaper, the post office, and warehouses. Within a few years, the population increased to nearly 450.

A steamboat passenger from Key West brought yellow fever to Port Leon in 1841. During the three-month epidemic, the population dropped to less than 200. Although many residents left, 139 of those who stayed died due to unsanitary conditions and the lack of medical care. Most were buried in Port Leon cemetery, located south of Port Leon Creek. No sign of the cemetery remains.

Strong winds from an approaching hurricane came on the morning of September 13, 1843. An afternoon lull eased residents' fears, but by midnight,

rising water flooded the town. A 10-foot tidal surge destroyed every dwelling and pushed the railroad bridge upriver. Miraculously, only one person was killed.

St. Marks suffered similar damage. Port Leon's citizens voted to move to higher land about four miles north of St. Marks near a sulphur spring. Once a promising town, abandoned in less than a decade after sickness and storm, nothing remains of Port Leon but the dreams of riches from the sea trade.

The 3.5-mile road to the Port Leon town site begins at the honor pay station near the St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge Visitor Center.



*Even though this marker is on an oak tree a short distance from the beginning of the Mounds Trail and not at Port Leon, it is a vivid reminder of a hurricane's power. It says, "Approx Flood Level 1843."
(Courtesy St. Marks Refuge files)*



The original refuge headquarters was built at the Port Leon site. (Courtesy St. Marks Refuge files)

The St. Marks Refuge Association, Inc., with a matching grant from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, produced the signs and brochures for the St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge History Trail. The association is a 501(c)(3) organization that supports educational, environmental, and biological programs of St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge. Visit www.stmarksrefuge.org for more information. 9/2010