

MOBILE BAY

Home & Garden

The lifestyle magazine for Mobile and Baldwin counties

March 2010

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ASHLAND PLACE

on Mobile Historic Homes Tour

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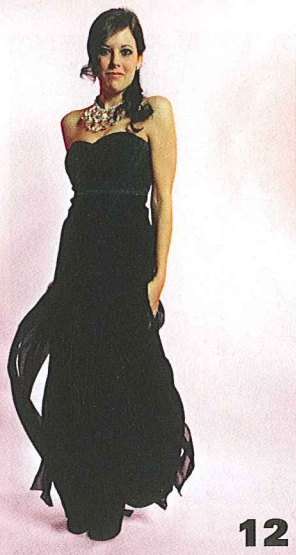


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ON OUR COVER The Fry house, on the boardwalk in Point Clear, has been a special place to relax for more than 150 years. PHOTO BY JEAN ALLSOPP



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A NATURAL ESCAPE

Nature, history and white sandy beaches converge in the revitalized old Florida villages of Franklin County.

TEXT BY JUDY CULBRETH AND WALTER KIRKLAND



NEAL SMITH-WILLOW / FINEARTAMERICA.COM

Think of a place somewhere in the U.S. where 87 percent of the land is protected, where no building is more than 35 feet high, where only two traffic lights shine in the entire county, and where bald eagles and marine life abound. You may think, "Well, that sounds like Alaska." Not even close. It's nearby Franklin County, Fla.

The county, comprised of Apalachicola, Carrabelle, Alligator

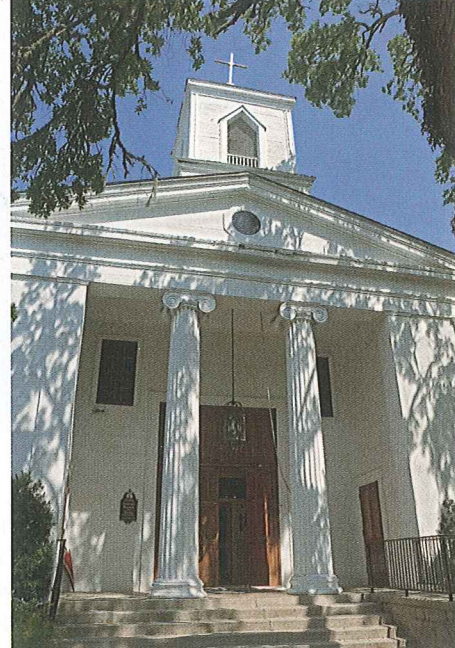
Point, Eastpoint and St. George Island, has approximately 11,000 residents, making it one of the least densely populated areas in Florida. More than 750,000 of its acres are virtual wilderness. Couple the natural serenity with a vital town life, exquisitely preserved architecture and white sandy beach, and the result is a perfect getaway for those who love "real" interesting places.

APALACHICOLA — UNWIND BACK IN TIME

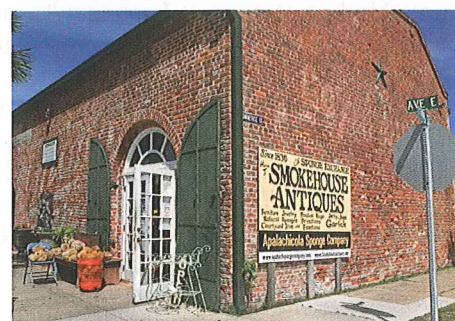
Town planners originally mapped out Apalachicola to resemble Philadelphia. Little has changed. Along the waterfront, antebellum brick and granite warehouses, below right, line broad streets near the wharves. The old net factories, chandleries and sponge storehouses are now homes to clothing boutiques, art galleries, antique shops and eateries. They are juxtaposed with working oyster boats and seafood processing plants – an authentic fishing village at work.

A bit back from the waterfront, as planned, is the heart of town. Mansions have been preserved as museums or inns. Bungalows and gingerbread Queen Anne-style homes proudly face wide, tree-lined streets, uninterrupted by modern intrusion. Historic churches, such as the 1838 Greek Revival gem Trinity Episcopal, right, still hold services. In all, there are more than 200 historic places within walking distance of one another, earning the small town of 2,500 the National Trust for Historic Preservation's designation as one of a "Dozen Distinctive Destinations."

Apalachicola may be quaint, but its inhabitants don't roll the sidewalks up at night. There are a number of cafés, gourmet restaurants and oyster joints that tempt visitors with famous seafood "caught wild and kept fresh," as they brag. This writing team also appreciates the convivial bar at the Gibson Inn, below left, which seems to be a magnet for friendly locals and jovial tourists.



WALTER KIRKLAND



FRANKLIN COUNTY/DC



WHERE TO STAY

COOMBS HOUSE INN Noted designer Lynn Wilson artfully renovated this exceptional boutique bed and breakfast, housed in an old mansion, above right. The lovely rooms and welcoming atmosphere have earned it many honors. Travel + Leisure magazine named it "One of the 30 Outstanding Small Inns in the United States." 80 SIXTH ST. 888-244-8320. COOMBSHOUSEINN.COM

GIBSON INN Built in 1907, the Gibson Inn was the centerpiece of Apalachicola when the town was a major center of shipping. The three-story hotel, with 30 private guest rooms, has been fully restored and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. It still serves as a community focal point. The wraparound porch lined with rocking chairs is an inviting place to chat. The inn's lively bar (see above) and gourmet restaurant (see right) are beacons of hospitality. 51 AVE. C. 850-653-2191. GIBSONINN.COM

WATER STREET HOTEL AND MARINA If you prefer much more modern rooms, book a stay at the new luxury Key West-style condominium on Scipio Creek, overlooking the Apalachicola River and estuary. It has all the modern amenities in a warm, Hemingway-style setting. 329 WATER ST. 888-211-9239. WATERSTREETHOTEL.COM

WHEN TO GO

Apalachicola is active year-round. But a red-letter date for the calendar is the weekend of April 30 - May 1. That's the timing of the Apalachicola Historic Home & Garden Tour and the Antique & Classic Boat Show. The famous tupelo trees should still be blooming that weekend.

WHERE TO DINE

CAFE MOMI AT THE GIBSON INN Chef Michael Feil, a graduate of the Culinary Institute of America, works with fresh, local foods to create his specialties. A recent offering on the menu was Gulf seafood paella, a hearty, flavorful rice dish with tasso, shrimp, fish and Alligator Point clams.

51 AVE. C. 850-653-2193.

CHEF EDDIE'S MAGNOLIA GRILL A tin roof, brick walls and antique accents create a cozy atmosphere for fine casual dining. Seafood, bistro and continental selections are favorites at this downtown spot. 75 MARKET ST. 850-653-8000.



OYSTER BAR

Apalachicola watershed is one of the cleanest estuarine habitats for oysters in North America. The 108-mile-long Apalachicola River runs through virtual wilderness its last 100 miles and delivers an average of 16 billion gallons of nutrient-rich water daily to the bay. For this reason, the famed Apalachicola oyster grows from spat (larval stage) to three-inch harvestable size in less than 10 months. Elsewhere, it takes at least two years.

Franklin County is the last place in America where oysters are harvested with tongs. It may be old-fashioned, but the method yields more than 6 million pounds of oyster meat each year and some chiseled oystermen. Don't miss enjoying them.

One place to sample the bivalves is Boss Oyster, where the motto is "shut up and shuck." BOSS OYSTER, 123 WATER ST. 850-653-9364. APALACHICOLARIVERINN.COM

ST. GEORGE ISLAND — UNSPOILED BEACH

This 28-mile-long, one-mile-wide barrier island, across the bridge from Apalachicola, is free from high rises and traffic congestion. What it lacks in population density, noise and water parks, it makes up for in unhurried beach life. It may remind you of the days when sand, shells, sea and sky (and perhaps a pail and shovel) could entertain a child all day. But there are lots of other wonderful things to do.

- **BIKING** The island offers a popular 6.3-mile bike path to the state park. Rentals are available.
- **FISHING** Anglers can fish the surf in the spring for pompano. In summer the catch is Spanish mackerel, speckled sea trout, redfish and the occasional shark.
- **KAYAKING** Kayak outfitter Journeys of St. George Island provides guided trips to St. Vincent Island, a 13,000-acre National Wildlife Preserve, for sightseeing, bird-watching, shelling and a glimpse at the majestic Sambar deer and red wolves. Kayak fishing and lessons for kids ages 7 to 14 are also available. 240 E. THIRD ST. 850-927-3259. SGISLANDJOURNEYS.COM

WHERE TO STAY

BEACH RENTALS There are many, many options, from cozy one-bedrooms (\$750/week in summer) to family reunion-size villas that sleep 24 (\$9,275/week).

850-927-5425. COLLINSVACATIONRENTALS.COM

877-272-8206. RESORTVACATIONSPROPERTIES.COM

CARRABELLE — FISHING HAVEN

Twenty miles east of Apalachicola, on St. James Island, Carrabelle is a working waterfront with recreational fishing and boating aplenty. It also boasts a championship golf course and a unique World War II museum.

FISHING

Angling is Carrabelle's major feature, for good reason. Three rivers converge at Carrabelle and connect with the Gulf of Mexico. There are more species of fish in the Apalachicola estuary than in any other place in North America.

Inshore fishing is active year-round. During March through May, hook speckled trout, redfish, Spanish mackerel and cobia. Pompano hit Franklin County beaches from mid-April to early June. Locals are known to drop everything when word spreads that the pompano are around. Fishing from the beach with jigs or shrimp will produce results, but sand fleas are like a pizza and a six-pack to a fat pompano.

In the summer, the tarpon fishing heats up. The prime area for tarpon is on the flats of St. George Sound, near Carrabelle. Because of the sound's unique coastal topography, the tarpon convoy through its very shallow, crystal clear water. Under ideal conditions, anglers can sight cast to up to 150 fish a day.

ROBINSON BROTHERS GUIDE SERVICE. 850-653-8896.
FLORIDAREDFISH.COM

GOLFING

St. James Bay Golf Resort is an 18-hole championship course with more than 90 acres of preserved wetlands on the property. Course designer Robert Walker worked with the Audubon Society to blend the par 72 course into the natural setting. Condos and villas, right on course, are available to rent. 151 LAUGHING GULL LANE. 850-697-9606.
STJAMESBAY.COM

MUSEUM-GOING

Under the leadership of Gen. Omar Bradley, more than 250,000 soldiers prepared for D-Day and other World War II landings at this amphibious training center. Displays recreate Camp Gordon Johnston experience. The camp was erected in 1942 on 165,000 acres in 60 days. 1001 GRAY AVE. CAMPGORDONJOHNSTON.COM

WHERE TO STAY

Old Carrabelle Hotel, circa 1888, is a former railroad hotel for traveling men. The bed and breakfast is the oldest hotel in the county. 201 TALLAHASSEE ST. 850-697-9010. OLD CARRABELLEHOTEL.COM

A variety of waterfront condos, many with boat docks and gulf access, have great amenities and very affordable rates. SANDY BEACH PROPERTIES. 850-697-5300. MYSANDYBEACH.COM

FOR MORE INFO: FRANKLIN COUNTY TOURIST DEVELOPMENT COUNCIL.
866-914-2068. ANATURALESCAPE.COM