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The Story of St. George Island

by Olivier Monod, President & Broker - Anchor Realty

St. George Island offers one of the best beaches (if not THE best) in the United States. The St. George Island beaches are ranked, year after year, among the top ten U.S. beaches... And they often make it to the very top: twenty miles of white sand beaches! The dominant southwesterly breeze renders the beaches extremely safe. Five miles offshore, access can be by road via a long wide new bridge, by private airplane (3,339' runway in mint condition), or by boat. Most visitors drive.

A BRIEF HISTORY

If history means anything, the island is the extension of a natural sand bank at the mouth of the Apalachicola River. The sand bank was created, approximately 5,000 years ago, by the counter effects of the Gulf tides and River flow. St. George Island was first explored by Europeans in the sixteenth century. Spanish Conquistadores visited the various peninsulas and barrier islands off the Florida Panhandle, giving them names of Saints, as was the norm in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries: Cape San Blas, St. Vincent Island, and of course, St. George Island. In those days, the Apalachicola Bay was home to a thriving Indian community. Burial mounds abound around the bay and on the island. Indian artifacts found daily on our shores attest to this historical past.

In the 1910s and earlier, St. George Island was a quaint barrier island, with only one resident family, the lighthouse keeper's. His last name was Marshall. He was the great-grandfather of Anchor's founder, Dwight I. Marshall, Jr. The lighthouse was then (and until the 1990s) located at the elbow of what is now Little St. George Island. This "corner" location was key to the safety of maritime traffic. The lighthouse's new location was dictated by "tourist" rather than maritime traffic – and, to the credit of the Lighthouse Association, they did a superb job reconstructing the monument.

In the 1920s, after the Great War, the island fell in the hands of a man of many talents, William Popham. He was a preacher turned speculator and oyster king (albeit for a short reign). His 'reign' lasted ten years, until the Federal Government stepped in; convicted him of fraud for advertising via the U.S. Mail that St. George Island was the Southern equivalent of New York City – with its network of street cars and cozy infrastructure. In those days, the lighthouse was the only human trace in this untouched sanctuary! One legacy came out of this scandal: the Federal laws on mail fraud – courtesy of the Popham case and St. George Island!

1930s: Good-bye Popham; Hello Clyde Atkinson! Clyde Atkinson was, back then, a young lawyer. He represented Popham through his legal misadventures. At the end, Popham lost everything and Atkinson received, in lieu of legal fees, title to St. George Island.In those days, it was like owning a parcel on the moon: he knew where it was, but it was of no practical utility. In the 1930s, values were driven by the turpentine income potential. St. George Island had quite a few pine trees, but they were shorter than the ones on the mainland (due to the adverse conditions on a barrier island); therefore, the yield was feeble. Furthermore, accessibility by turpentine harvesters and transportation of the product were tedious and costly. Therefore, it was not a good acquisition... Yet.

The 1940s saw the island be put to patriotic use. Leased by its new owner to the United States Army, it served as top secret training ground for the Landing in Normandy. Hitler's bellicose passion translated into World War II in 1939. The United States joined the Allied Forces in the wake of the Japanese attacks on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. From this point, things would move rather quickly: landing in North Africa on November 8, 1942; and the big one, in Normandy on June 6, 1944, to give a final blow to "Festung Europa", Fortress Europe as the Nazis called it, so skillfully prepared by Rommel, the "Desert Fox". Seldom credit is given to the locations where our valiant troops received their impeccable training: St. George Island and Dog Island for the actual training; and Camp Gordon Johnston in Lanark Village for the accommodations... After the war, Clyde Atkinson lost a good tenant and the income it brought.

In the 1950s, the island was somewhat of a Frontier. Clyde one day discussed with a close friend of his, by the last name of Smith, the possibility to develop the island. Smith had just retired and he was a fantastic salesman. The concept became reality when the four miles of beaches, now known as the "Gulf Beaches", were platted. Dirt roads were built. Enthusiasm was present – yet, more enthusiasm than potential buyers! The first sales of beachfront lots were "extracted" from local Apalachicolians (the most logical market). Dwight I. Marshall, Jr., Anchor's founder, was among them. It was a deal hard to turn down: free land if the owner built a house within three years! A handful of families soon resided there year-round. Among them, Dwight Marshall and his wife Helen; and the Armisteads, founders of SunCoast Realty. In those days, it was still possible to hunt wild hogs in what would become the Plantation.

In the 1960s, a toll bridge was constructed. Narrow and (it would be known later) structurally flawed, it nevertheless represented a tremendous leap forward: the island now was accessible to all. In those days, the "honor system" prevailed: the toll booth was closed at night; and honest citizens had to stop in order to place their $2 donation in a box... It was the decade when Dwight Marshall began his real estate business, from his home on West Gorrie Drive.

The 1970s saw another leap forward: the development of the Plantation. Until 1973, what was not the "Gulf Beaches" still belonged to Clyde Atkinson. It was the majority of the island. It includes what we know today as the State Park, the East End and the Plantation. Two young businessmen, Gene Brown and John Stocks approached Clyde Atkinson and purchased in bulk the balance of Clyde's interest on the island. Clyde carved for his family (Sarah, his daughter; and Ted Rodrigue, his son-in-law) several beachfront lots, where his daughter and grand-sons would end up building beach homes. Brown and Stock, soon after closing, sold the the State of Florida the State Park. Gene was a brilliant attorney; and John a skilled businessman, who, among other accomplishments, purchased the scraps of the Statue of Liberty (yes, the NYC one!) when it was restored at the end of the twentieth century; he then resold them as memorabilia; and thus became a pioneer in recycling! The foresight in planning the Plantation was tremendous: low density; keeping native vegetation as natural landscape; minimum standards of construction; one dorsal road (Leisure Lane) to access the entire subdivision in order to preserve peace and privacy of the residents; an airstrip long enough to receive some jets (Citation Bravo, etc.); a dedicated staff responsible for security and much more; and, ofcourse, a location second to none, with the Gulf of Mexico on one side and the Bay of Apalachicola on the other. At the westernmost end, Bob Sikes Cut offers views so unique that lots there command a premium over beachfront property...Plantation sales began well.

In the 1980s, the real estate market slowed down, and the economy was severely affecting real estate sales. Interest rates did flirt with 20%. The Plantation developers soon faced financial hardship. Andrew Jackson Savings Bank, who had followed them during their good days, was now facing a major problem at the coast: a huge delinquent loan! In those days, banks had not become accustomed (yet) to these types of problems. Andrew Jackson thus became the unwilling owner of dozens of Plantation lots. Between 1988 and 1990, they marketed lot bundles comprising one beachfront lot, one bay front lot, and two interior lots for $165,000 – with 10% and very attractive interest rates. The architecture of the Plantation was still what the original developers had mandated: earth tones; cypress and pine; cedar shakes roofs... The rest of the island fared peacefully during this decade. The commercial district saw two new buildings added: in 1982, the Anchor Realty building, where the SGI Fresh Market and Anchor Realty building now stands. The old building was built in the purest local tradition: cedar shakes and stained cypress sidings. In 1985, Jack and Barbara Vail, a retired couple from Pennsylvania, built the St. George Inn (still standing!) next to the Anchor Realty office. Jack's passion was history. The piano bar at the bottom level was often the center of heated discussions (always civil and sober) concerning history. In the early 1980s, two of Anchor's principals, Willie Norred and Dwight Marshall attempted, unsuccessfully, to incorporate the island. In 1988, Anchor Realty's new addition was Olivier Monod. He would soon become the company's president (in 1990).

Since the 1990s, a marginal but vocal 'lobby' of new transplants was beginning to challenge most new development ideas, however small – after having secured their own place in paradise under the sun, as loyal proponents of the saying: Charity begins at home! One thing remains certain, the island was evolving: new construction styles favored more colorful buildings, larger houses, and more architectural research. The "boxes on stilts" were being replaced by "statements of personality", and sometimes by "palaces by the sea". More restaurants and shops were opening. No Cartier or Gucci, of course, but an overall attention to Franklin County's heritage of fabulous seafood and wood craftsmanship. Symbolically, it was the decade when the sleeping giant, The Saint Joe Company, chose to morph from a quiet land holding company into a vibrant mega-developer: JOE, ARVIDA and The St. Joe Company were born! In those days, the future seemed bright and limitless; fueled by millions of retiring baby boomers.

Then, the early 2000s roared in! Speculation, enthusiasm, faith, passion, and, maybe, just a bit of blindness helping, Plantation beachfront prices went up from the $300,000 mark in 2000 to $2,500,000 at the peak in 2005. The optimism of the 1990s had morphed into hubris... And Hubris is always destructive.

2001, 2002 and 2003 were fantastic years: strong sustained growth. Then, 2004 was unbelievable: prices of beachfront lots increased by 93% from January 1st to December 31st – this means they almost doubled within the same calendar year. It was too good to be true – or too good to be sustainable. In a "bubble model" unfortunately well tested by the "dot.com" then "real estate", a sudden acceleration of prices is the omen for the impending crash! Until 2003, many believed the uptrend could last forever. But 2004 showed to the savvy professionals that this was unsustainable. Harry and Katrena Plumblee, REALTORS with Anchor, did discourage their clients from purchasing (and were encouraging them to sell) as early as the summer of 2004. They were right; they were wise; and they were honest. Few can boast of these three qualities. Then, the Titanic hit the iceberg. For the doomed ship, the fatidic date was April 12, 1912. For the island real estate market, it was April 1, 2005. Bad things happen in April might one conclude!

And the 2010s are here. Their beginnings were less than glorious: no real estate sales; serious doubts concerning property values; and a grim economy. The explosion on April 20, 2010 (note: another April catastrophe!) of an oil-drilling platform, BP's Blue Water Horizon, served as the perfect symbol of these new times: the explosion of a dream, and having to deal with the remnants of this dream. Starting in late 2012, the real estate market has shown strong signs of recovery. The volume of transactions has gone up exponentially (it was not difficult, because it started from almost zero); and prices have shown stability (a plus when we know where absurd increases led us). The crossing of the desert did last 7 years and 7 months (and possibly 7 days!) – it was very long and painful to many. Let's only hope we have reached the Promised Land and not just an Oasis...

The 2010s and beyond. What is in stock for our future? Projections are always tempting. We always tend to make the same mistake, in projecting the past into the future. Big mistake indeed, for Fate has infinite ways to surprise us, sometimes for the better and sometimes for the worst! Who could have "projected" in the 1920s that Popham's hubris would lead to a classified site commandeered by the U.S Military twenty years later? Who, in the nineteenth century, would have inferred from those days' (sensible) attitude to stay away from the sun, that one day vacationers would pay premium dollars to roast under the rays of the same sun? Therefore, how can we look at the future? Let us underscore a few elements that may play a crucial role:

- Tourism: the Ocean (or Gulf) and quality beaches represent a dream for many inland dwellers. This dream is likely to remain. This might be the strongest base for optimism.
- Seafood: the past twenty years have witnessed a gradual decrease in the seafood industry. This can be attributed to a plurality of factors. These factors include the incremental acidification of Oceans worldwide resulting in changes in marine life habitat; its consequences are global (not only Florida) and seem to bring about a dwindling oyster production. Also, some species threatened by overfishing. On a more positive note; the sea will always be the necessary reservoir for seafood; the specialties that make us famous today (oysters, grouper, scallops, shrimp, etc.) may come out of fashion tomorrow; yet, the need for seafood should remain, and it can take many different faces.
- Agriculture; our pristine land, with ample water supply, and rich soil in numerous places, can also bring about a new asset, hitherto underexploited, agriculture. This should obviously take place, not on the island, but rather on the hinterland – but in the island's close proximity.

Therefore, in conclusion, optimism seems warranted despite the ups and downs of the economy...

THE TOPOLOGY

The island is comprised of two large State Parks: one to its far east; the other one to its far west. The middle area is developed. It covers approximately twelve miles in length (east-west; with beach and bay frontage) by half a mile as an average (north-south). The three main developable areas of the island are:

- at the center, the "Gulf Beaches". They are the oldest subdivision there. Platted in the 1950s, before the bridge was built, they include the commercial area at the center (roughly 25 acres) and mostly 1/3 acre single family residential lots spreading eastward and westward for about two miles. They are the necessary point ofentry to the island. This is where all of the commercial amenities are located. Driving through the Gulf-Beaches takes us back in time, for many of the houses there, made of concrete blocks and built on a concrete slab, take us back to a different era, the 1960s.
- to the west, the "Plantation". It is a private gated community with approximately one thousand residential lots (most of one acre). No commercial activity is permitted in the Plantation. Amenities include: a luxurious clubhouse with a community swimming pool, tennis courts, jogging and bicycling trails, walkways to the beach, and a 3,339-foot paved airstrip.
- to the east, the "East End Tracts". Somewhat of the Frontier within the island, It attracts artists and free-thinkers. The densities are similar to those of the Plantation (1 unit per acre). The bayside is densely forested. The beaches are deep and gorgeous.

Elevations range between 28-feet and sea level. The island is oriented east-west, with a noticeable counter-clockwise rotation, promoting fabulous sunrises on the beachside and unforgettable sunsets on the bay side.

THE REAL ESTATE MARKET

St. George Island has historically led the Forgotten Coast's real estate market. The Forgotten Coast is the informal name given the the coastline between Alligator Point to the east and Mexico Beach to the west. It represents approximately 80 linear miles, accounting for many more miles of coastline. An introduction to the real estate market has already been made under "A Brief History" above. Since the end of 2012, the market seems to have recovered. Beachfront lots tend to trade for slightly over twice the price of bay front and first tier lots. Interior lots usually sell for between 15% and 20% of the price of their beachfront counterparts. Because the market fluctuates every day; please contact a REALTOR for the most current pricing and trend information. You are invited to look up our team under "Meet our Team" on our Homepage.

ATTRACTIONS & FESTIVALS

We have two attractions that are available 24/7;

- The beach: voted among the Top 10 U.S. Beaches almost every year.
- Fishing: among the most abundant and varied in the U.S.

Some are cyclical;

- First weekend in March: "St. George island Chili Cook-off"
- Every full moon: "Sunset/Full Moon Climb at the Lighthouse"
- Fourth of July: Fireworks
- First weekend in August: "Kingfish Shootout"
- Second weekend in August: "SGI Sizzler 5k Race"
- Check also the many festivals held (almost weekly) in Apalachicola...

AMENITIES

Vacationers can stay in one motel (The Buccaneer Inn) or in a boutique hotel (The St. George Inn). In addition to the hotel rooms, close to one thousand houses are offered for rent – many beachfront – ranging in size from one to eight bedrooms.

The island offers a rather complete support system with one large grocery store; two convenience stores; many restaurants; oyster bars; ice-cream shops; beach stores; and clothing stores. The island caters well to tourists with bicycle and jet-ski rentals; plus many charter fishing captains; and even an eco-tours provider.

Three churches are present: a Roman Catholic mission across from, and courtesy of, the Blue Parrot Restaurant (Mass at 8:30 AM on Sundays); a First Baptist Church; and a United Methodist Church. All three are located in the central commercial area.

The presentation of the island would be incomplete without a well-deserved tribute to Jay Abbott, the Fire Chief, who has been instrumental in making the SGI Volunteer Fire Department an example of efficiency and dedication. Today, several women and men serve around the clock in order to ensure that everyone on the island is safe. Priceless!

I hope you enjoyed reading this brief history. If you have any questions or are considering buying or selling, please contact Anchor Realty. We have the knowledge, experience and passion to meet your needs.

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