

FERNANDINA BEACH

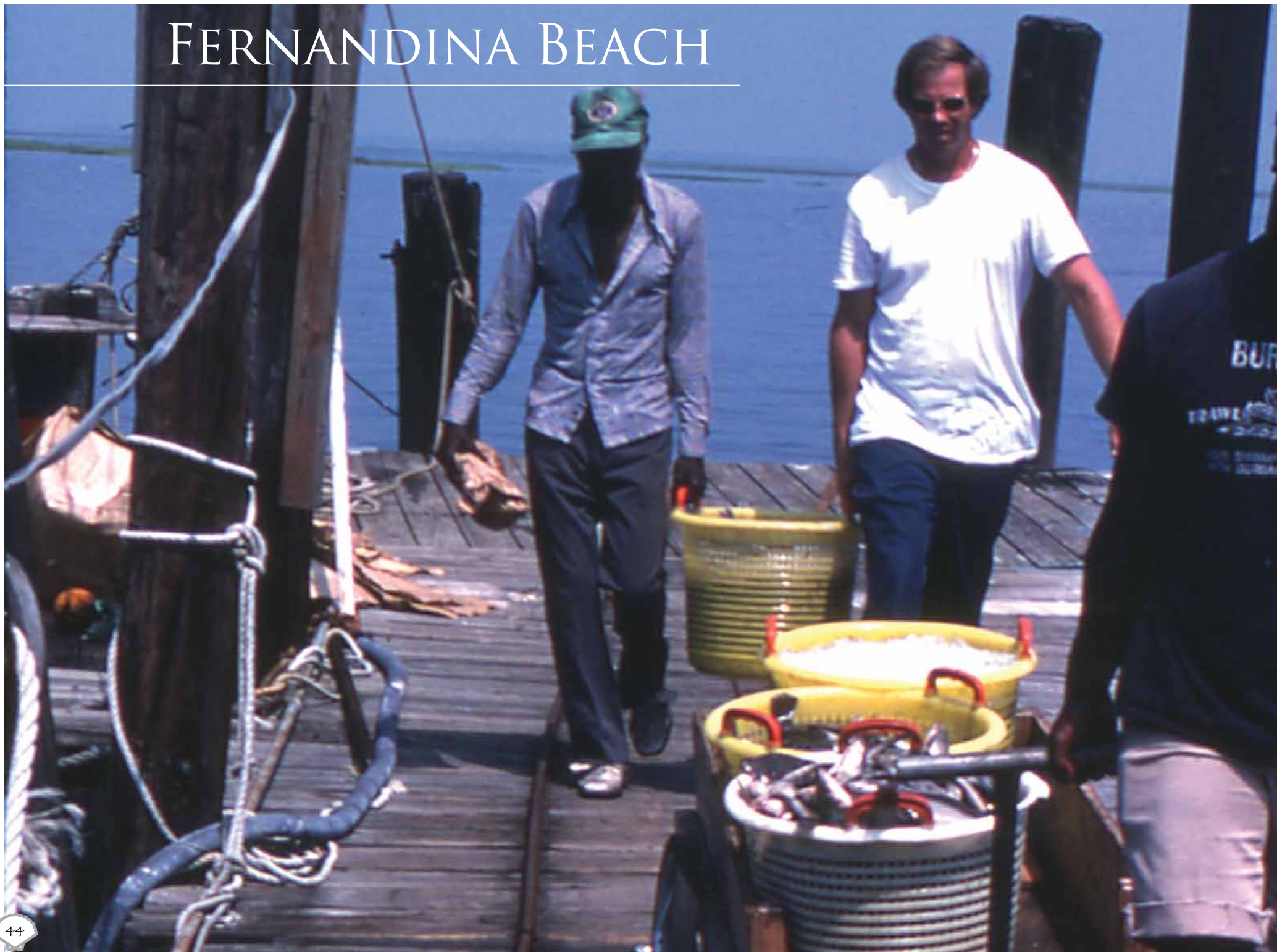




Photo: State Archives of Florida

FERNANDINA BEACH

Community Snapshot

MISSION: “To organize and manage the revitalization of the Fernandina Beach waterfront through a comprehensive revitalization strategy, which shall focus on environmental and resource protection, hazard mitigation, public access to the waterfront, and maintaining the traditional waterfront economy.”

DESIGNATION: 2005

APPLICANT: City of Fernandina Beach

STATUS: Active, meets monthly

PARTNERS: City of Fernandina Beach CRA; Recreation Committee; the Port of Fernandina; downtown merchants.

KEY ACCOMPLISHMENTS: CRA Design Guidelines; Waterfront Master Plan; zoning code change requiring public access to the waterfront; Historic Property Survey update; new Waterfront Mixed Use future land use category; marina improvements; mooring field; planned streetscape improvements for Front Street.

CURRENT CHALLENGES: Financial incentives for shrimp industry; addressing loss of retail establishments in the traditional downtown.

FLORIDA ASSESSMENT OF COASTAL TRENDS DATA:

Number of Active Volunteers:	13
Volunteer Hours Contributed:	1,640
Public Dollars Contributed:	\$3.1 million
Private Dollars Contributed:	\$1.5 million

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Located in the far northeastern corner of the state, closer to Georgia than to Jacksonville, the City of Fernandina Beach is a historic waterfront industrial town. With two working paper mills, a deepwater port, and a small shrimping and fishing fleet, Fernandina Beach is a prime example of a true working waterfront. Situated on a barrier island flanked by the Amelia River and the Atlantic Ocean, Fernandina Beach is one of the oldest cities in Florida. The City was settled by the French in 1567 and incorporated in 1824.¹ Today, a 50-block area is designated as the Fernandina Beach Historic District; nearly 300 Victorian, Queen Anne, or Italianate structures are listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Fernandina Beach has long been called the birthplace of the modern shrimping industry. In the early 1900s local fisherman began to adapt “otter trawl” nets for shrimping, and the commercial shrimping industry began. By 1917, over one hundred shrimp boats made up the shrimping fleet, producing over 10 million pounds of shrimp. Historic records illustrate that by the mid 1920s, several fish houses had been constructed along the Amelia River waterfront. Commercial shrimping-related businesses, such as packaging and net making, were also prevalent from the 1940s through the 1980s.

Shrimpers maintain a presence on the waterfront, but many support businesses evolved or retooled as the industry weakened because of fishery regulations and imported shrimp. The Burbank family, who has manufactured nets for three generations, refocused from making trawl nets to nets for batting cages and backstops for major and minor league baseball stadiums. Several of the buildings that once housed these water-related businesses are in a state of disrepair, but their owners have been reluctant to tear down the structures in fear of losing their right to rebuild over the water.

Redevelopment of the City’s waterfront area has long been a topic of discussion over the years. The City underwent a series of efforts to establish a vision for the revitalization for the waterfront area that included the Waterfront Task Force Plan, Vision 2000, and the Community Redevelopment Area (CRA). However, citizens and local stakeholders still viewed the waterfront, especially at the city’s marina, as “piecemeal” and in need of a more comprehensive approach with input from a variety of interests.

THE WATERFRONTS FLORIDA PARTNERSHIP

To jump start revitalization efforts and get all of the stakeholders on the same page, the City submitted an application for designation as a Waterfronts Florida Partnership community in 2005. A City-appointed committee spearheaded the application and continued with a mission to develop a comprehensive strategy



¹ Sources consulted included Bland, 2007 and Pacetti, 1980



to revitalize the waterfront while working to maintain the traditional economy. The committee was structured to include representatives of the two paper mills, the port, shrimping, property owners, a member at-large, and the City's Planning Advisory Board and Historic District Council. Downtown business owners were added later. Similarly, the original Waterfronts Florida area focused exclusively on the properties that faced the Amelia River but was later amended to include the CRA and the commercial portions of the City's historic district adjacent to the waterfront.

The designation came at the tail-end of the real estate boommarket when waterfront property commanded over-the-top dollars. After a year of organizing and study, the Waterfronts Florida Committee sponsored a series of community meetings to create a vision for the Fernandina Beach waterfront that produced a host of ideas that focused on the need to:

- Maintain views and public access to the water;
- Establish a sense of place along the water's edge; and
- Maintain the character of Fernandina Beach as reflected in its working waterfront and historic district.



The goals included protection of historical resources — critical to a community where the local and name brand businesses are located in historical structures; integration of the historic structures into the City's plans to recover from a disaster — important in a City adjacent to a river and an ocean; provisions for public access to the water and the waterfront vistas; and retention of the traditional waterfront industries that include the local shrimping industry.

As a complement to the vision plan, design guidelines were prepared for the CRA by the University of Florida to focus on view corridors and public access to the waterfront. A zoning overlay was put in place to protect view corridors so that waterfront residential and other types of development do not obliterate vistas of the Amelia River. The City is working to establish green space along the waterfront where parking is currently under-utilized and a new welcome station with improved shower and laundry facilities are being designed for boaters.

BEYOND PLANNING: THE REALITIES OF A WATER-BASED LIFE

Implementation of some ideas that eluded the City are coming to fruition, such as hiring an engineer to redesign and improve Front Street, adoption of the Waterfront mixed use designation in the comprehensive plan that allow for both working waterfront uses as well as limited residential uses, and the construction of a mooring field for transient boaters.

The shrimping industry continues to face competition from imports plus a new problem — the cost of fuel. A long-time shrimper from the Fernandina Beach area told the Waterfronts Partnership Committee in May 2008 that shrimpers had to catch at least four boxes of shrimp per day to pay for the fuel. Others are looking for state or federal money to purchase property within and just outside the designated area to set aside for dock space for shrimp boats to offload or to establish a processing facility that would sell locally and internationally, plus take advantage of shell waste to create marketable byproducts for agricultural use. Although the City has yet to decide how to protect the industry it celebrates, it has made great strides in protecting the area from over-development.