

History of The Palm Beach County Courthouse
Part 1
By Tom Hoadley

Before Florida was ceded to the United States, it had been a possession of the Spanish Crown for 250 years. When Florida became a Territory in 1823, “South” Florida’s only city of significance was Key West. This was the seat of Monroe County, which extended north to Lake Okeechobee. Ship salvager, Jacob Houseman and fifty settlers left Key West. They established a new town to the north of Indian Key, it was considered to be a better area to salvage wrecked ships. Houseman pushed the Legislature to create Dade County out of Monroe County on February 4, 1836, and designated Indian Key to be the County seat.

Business soured for Houseman, and his salvage license was revoked. There was a second Seminole War. On August 4, 1840 one hundred Seminoles raided Indian Key. They killed between six to thirteen residents, burned and leveled all but one building. The island became uninhabitable, the county seat was moved to Miami in 1844, and remained there for thirty-six years.

In the early 1880’s the town of Miami consisted of three houses and some old buildings that had been used as barracks by the Army during the 1850’s Third Seminole War. J.W. Ewan, a native of North Carolina and the political boss of Southern Dade County, owned the barracks and known as the “Duke of Dade”. Dade County paid Ewan five dollars a month for the use of a single room in one of the old Army barracks. It was used for a Court and for conducting county business, including a seldom-operating Justice of the Peace Court.

In 1886, Dade County joined the Seventh Judicial Circuit. The Circuit Judge was John D. Broome from Deland. He didn’t appear at the Courthouse in Miami until 1889 for various reasons. There was the press of other business in other areas of the state, yellow fever quarantine at Key West, and trials in Orlando and other places.

Dade County at this time was a watery empire in itself. It extended one hundred fifty miles along the coast, from the St. Lucie River in the north, to Cape Sable in the south. It was half as long as the distance from West Palm Beach to Jacksonville. It was a sprawling; mostly empty Lake, River, and Sawgrass area comprised of what are today, Dade, Broward and Palm Beach Counties, most of Martin County, and part of Okeechobee County. Early crackers who lived along the rivers and lakes as “gators behind, moc-a-sons ahead, and skeeters be-twixt” described the area. The first lawyer in our area was Allen E. Heyser, he was from Pennsylvania, studied law in Georgia, and moved to Lake Worth in 1885. He built a twenty-room hotel on the lake and named it The Riviera Inn. This was the namesake of what was to become Riviera Beach. He was our County Judge for almost twenty-five years.

In 1888 the Duke of Dade raised the room rent in the Army barracks from five dollars to fifteen dollars a month as the "Lake Worth Region" requested a special election for a change of the County seat. They had been encouraged by the election in 1888 of John Davidson as County Representative, from the Lake Worth Region. Another factor in their favor was the prospect of a narrow gauge railroad connecting the Indian River steamers docking at Jupiter with the steamer and sailboats at the head of Lake Worth. At this time, the Jupiter and Lake Worth Railroad were graded but no track was laid. So goods and traffic were unloaded at Jupiter from the steamboats of the Indian River Steamboat Company moved by wagon through Juno to the steamer "Lake Worth".

The voting population of Dade County in 1889 was about nine hundred, not including Indians, who could only vote for their Chiefs. The Florida Constitution at that time contained a provision that a county seat could be moved once every ten years.

So the widely scattered voters, in a legal revolt against the Duke of Dade held a county seat election in the old Dade County Courtroom in Miami in 1889. Since the Juno area had more votes, it was decided 107 to 80 that the Courthouse would be moved from Miami to Juno. After the election, the next step was to transfer the County records. The citizens of Miami objected strongly and refused to forward any of the county records to Juno. They were pledged to use force, the newly elected Dade County Commissioners met in the Lake Worth region, and delegated A.G. Quimby, County Clerk elect, Allen Heyser, County Judge elect and County Commissioner Porter to go to Miami to secure the records. "Three husky pioneers" accompanied them, as trouble was expected. How Juno obtained the Courthouse records will be in the next issue.

History of The Palm Beach County Courthouse Part 2

Widely scattered voters, in a legal revolt against the Duke of Dade, held a County seat election in the old Dade, County Courtroom in Miami in 1884. Since the Juno area had more votes, it was decided 107 to 80 that the Courthouse would be moved from Miami to Juno. After the election, the next step was to transfer the County records. The citizens of Miami objected strongly, and refused to forward any of the county records to Juno. They were pledged to use force. The newly elected Dade County Commissioners met in the Lake Worth region, and delegated A.G. Quimby, County Clerk elect, Allen Heyser, County Judge elect, and County Commissioner Porter to go to Miami to secure the records. "Three husky pioneers" accompanied them, as trouble was expected. The argument over the records with the Miami officials took the better part of a day.

The argument was to be continued the next day. The Miamians went home confident the records were safe for the time being, as the ocean was very rough. They were sure no boat could put out for the Lake Worth Region. Mr. Quimby was able to quietly secure a large Indian canoe. They loaded the Dade County records and books into the canoe. They took the interior and placid Indian route through waterways of the Everglades to the Fort-Lauderdale House of Refuge attic. Quimby stood guard over the records, while the rest went for help. The sailboat "Amy" skippered by Danny O'Neil was sent south to pick up the records, to deliver them to Juno.

Within a year, Lake Worth contractor, C.C. Haight, at a cost of \$1,495.00, was erecting a new two-story Dade County Courtroom.

The Juno landscape at that time was low sand hills studded with palmetto and some pine. Juno was not a town, but an unincorporated village with seven homes, two boarding houses, a newspaper building, one small store on the dock near the waters edge, and a small railroad station. Juno did not have a church or a preacher. They did not have a doctor, a schoolhouse, a bank, or other financial institution and it did have one newspaper. In the spring of 1891, Guy Metcalf brought his Indian River News down from Titusville to Juno, renaming it The Tropical Sun. At that time it was the only newspaper between Titusville and Key West. Present day reviews say it was well written and printed.

Albert N. Field had homesteaded 160 acres in the area. He gave one acre to Dade County for the Courthouse and Jail with the understanding that the title to the property would return to him or his heirs if this acre was no longer used for public purposes. The Courthouse grounds were located just a little less than one half-mile north of the end of the northern end of Lake Worth. It was just west of the right-of-way of what was to be the narrow gauge Jupiter and Lake Worth Railway, to connect Indian River and Lake Worth boat traffic.

The Dade County Courthouse in Juno was a very substantial two story wooden structure. Most say it extended thirty feet north and south, and thirty-five feet east and west. C.C. Chillingworth is on record in a 1932 speech that the Courthouse was forty by sixty-five feet. Whatever size it was, it had three coats of white paint, and it became the most notable landmark in that vicinity. There were only three rooms on the first floor. The general county office was across the front, occupied by the Clerk of the Circuit Court Quimby, the County Judge A.E. Heyser, and the County Tax Assessor. In the rear were two smaller rooms for juries. When not in use by juries, one small room was used by the County Tax Collector. The Titusville Law Firm of Robbins, Graham, and Chillingworth used the other small room. The resident partner was C.C. Chillingworth, the father of our slain Circuit Judge. The firm traded free legal advice to the County for free rent.

There was a stairway against the rear wall, which led to the second story. Only one large room occupied the entire second floor. The largest in South Florida at the time, served as a courtroom, a church, a lodge hall, and a ballroom. Meetings and dances could be held for \$5.00 a night. Circuit Judge John D. Broome would hold Court there every six months. His circuit extended from Miami to Daytona on the coast, and west of Sanford, Deland, Orlando and Kissimmee. Judge Broome was considered to be a most kindly gentleman. When his Court work was finished, he would not be back for another six months. The terms of the Circuit Court were great events in the life of Juno and the entire lower east coast of Florida. Jurors from Miami were usually highly irritated. They had to come up from Biscayne Bay by sailboat along the ocean, and would enter Lake Worth through the old Lake Worth Inlet and proceed north to the Juno dock for jury duty. The Courthouse was then about a one-half mile walk inland from the Juno dock down a sandy road. The jurors didn't usually have much to do and could hardly wait until the ten-year county seat election rolled around.

In 1900, Miami finally had the vote to move the Dade County Courthouse back to Miami. Near the Southwest corner of the Courthouse yard stood the famous Dade County Jail. It was a small low one story building, eighteen feet by twenty feet in size, with a row of iron cells along the north side of the structure. In between the jail and the railroad, there was later built a small structure to be used by the jailer and his wife for a home and a kitchen for feeding the prisoners.

Sometime prior to 1907, every building in Juno including the old Courthouse and Jail, were swept away by a raging forest fire. Flagler's railroad had bypassed Juno, and the fire finished it. The town simply vanished.

History of The Palm Beach County Courthouse
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Part-3

The Dade County Courtroom was located in Juno from 1890 to 1900, as a result of the 1889 election. The Court records had been spirited out of Miami by local pioneers in an Indian canoe along interior waterways through the Everglades. The Juno pioneers had out-voted and outsmarted Miami and Key West in 1889. The election in 1899 would be a different story. They lost and the Courthouse was moved back to Miami.

The years between 1890 and 1900 started slowly, but ended tumultuously. The population was isolated and law-abiding for the first few years of the decade. Dade was 7,200 square miles, but the 1890 census showed a population of only 726 persons.

The 1890 to 1900 history of local law and order can be obtained in the first hundred pages in the Circuit Court Minute Book, Number 1. You can read this in the Palm Beach County Courthouse. Examining that, we find that generally there was peace and quiet in the area. There hadn't been but a single murder in the region during the 40 years preceding 1893. Up until 1894, Dade had been a dry county. Therefore, most of the criminal activity was bootlegging "Blind Tiger" (a local name for moonshine). The Grand Jury, in its report to the Circuit Court on December 12th, 1890, proudly congratulated the "good and intelligent citizens" of this county for the complete absence of crime. But the Grand Jury "sensing" trouble ahead, suggested that the County buy itself an iron safe in which to keep valuable papers.

Then in 1894, the Flagler railroad crews hit Palm Beach County as the railroad construction came south. First, Banyan Street became known as "Thirst Street" because of the free flowing liquor, all night dance halls; open gambling, and extensive prostitution. All those pleasures railroad construction crews would have trouble avoiding. These "dens of iniquity" ran wide open day and night. C.C. Chillingworth explained: "The rough element was strong and aggressive. The conservative, respectable element was also strong, but not aggressive". It was so bad that Carrie Nation was to walk down Thirst Street, axe in hand, a few years later. As the decade opened, the State Attorney was J.B. Beggs; the Sheriff was John F. Highsmith; and the Clerk was still Albert Quimby. The 1890 Dade Circuit Court heard one case charging forcible entry, one laborer's lien against the railroad and accepted an application for citizenship from Steven N. Andrews. The Circuit Court was convened every six months.

The next Circuit Court and Grand Jury met May 19, 1891, a couple was indicted for "lewd and lascivious cohabiting". This couple avoided prosecution by getting married, and then the case was dismissed. It is unknown if they lived happily ever after.

Judge Broome was unable to come here during the rest of 1891 and 1892 because of a crime wave and a large caseload of criminal business in Lake County.

The first real criminal case in Juno was on May 18, 1892. Present was Circuit Judge John D. Broome, County Judge S.E. Heyser, and attorneys Minor S. Jones, L.J. Dollins, and C.C. Chillingworth. Edward Albury (no evidence that he was related to Cecil) was indicted with assault with intent to commit murder. His bond was \$250.00. Since Juno had not yet constructed its iron-cage Jail, Albury was transferred to the Brevard County Jail. Incidentally, Albury received a six-month hard labor sentence at the Penitentiary on a guilty plea.

The Juno Jail problem was solved in 1892. The Dade County Jail was built in Juno at a cost of \$350.00. It mostly consisted of bolted together iron cages that cost another \$850.00. There was additional work done on the nearby two-story Courthouse. Contractor Haight finished and sealed the second floor. Haight was ordered to provide chairs for the Courthouse offices and to construct a water closet, 6 by 10 feet, with a screen door. Given three coats of white paint, the white Courthouse in the wilderness was getting ready.

1890 was the year the Plant System built the narrow gauge Celestial Railroad from Jupiter south to the north end of Lake Worth. It wasn't until May 5, 1898 that the mammoth dredge Mantanzas finished the East Coast Canal from Jupiter into Lake Worth, linking them by water. In 1892, C.C. Chillingworth opened a law office in Juno, his Remington typewriter was the first in Dade County. The Celestial Railroad installed a telephone in April; this new invention was a source of wonderment to the old timers.

The decade of 1890 to 1900 ended in a blaze of trouble. Sam Lewis, Silver Tooth Jim, and a host of gamblers and professional bootleggers came into town with Flagler's railroad. They all hung around Thirst Street. There were 17 more burials in the town's own "Boot Hill" on Dixie Highway between 1883 and 1886, but more about this era in the next installment.

History of The Palm Beach County Courthouse
Part 4
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In 1894, Flagler's railroad was built into Palm Beach County. A horde of grafters, con men, and prostitutes followed the railroad crews to Thirst Street. One was a fugitive from Texas, Sam Lewis. In addition to being a murderer, Sam was a handsome ladies man (it was later discovered that he had two wives) and the bartender in a saloon on the corner of Olive and Thirst.

John Highsmith was a lean, lanky character, and a former tax collector for Dade County. Sam and John got into some disagreement in a poker game. Gambling was, of course, one of the highlights of Thirst Street. Sam left West Palm Beach to tend bar in Lemon City (North Miami). He felt safer near that great wilderness, the Everglades, where so many men hunted by the law had found refuge.

On July 26, 1895. John Highsmith was in Lemon City visiting his nephew, and decided to go to the poolroom. This was where Sam was tending bar. Highsmith and Davis became slightly drunk and rowdy, and decided to throw billiard balls at Sam. Sam grabbed his 44 Marlin and took a shot at them, luckily the shot missed.

On the morning of July 27, 1895, John Highsmith, Davis, and another young man named Friar came walking down Main Street in Lemon City. Sam met them with his 44 Marlin and said:

“Get down on your knees and apologize or I'll shoot you!”

John stood his ground and answered: “ Shoot if you think it's honorable to shoot an unarmed man”(This was a bigger mistake). Sam pulled the trigger and killed John Highsmith. He then turned the raffle on Davis and killed him. Friar was next; he fell on his knees and said: “For God's sake, don't shoot” and he was spared.

Lewis ran to the nearby store, filled his pockets with cartridges and fled out the back door into the Everglades. A stunned Lemon City was left with two dead, and a killer in the Everglades, nearby doors were barred, women and children inside. A posse was formed. Sam Lewis forced the owner of a sailboat to take him to the Bahamas. Someone had seen this and the posse cabled Nassau. The Nassau Police captured Sam, and held him until Sam brought out his 44 Marlin. The same boatman who took him to Nassau brought him back. Always a ladies man, Sam hid in an old girlfriend's house. The posse surrounded the house. Deputy McGregor comes up to arrest Sam and shot him in the leg. Lewis lay on the floor, and McGregor kicked the 44 Marlin out of his reach. Sam had a pistol in his shirt. Lying wounded on the floor, he shot and killed Deputy McGregor. Now, there were three dead.

The posse had gathered outside wanting to lynch Sam, but they agreed not to. He was taken by sailing schooner to the Juno Jail and put in one of the iron cages.

Court was held twice a year and Judge Broome had been there only the month before, it would be five long months before Sam could be tried. Sam's Thirst Street friends hatched a plan to overwhelm the jailer, and spring him. The outraged settlers decided to lynch Sam the night before this was to happen.

On August 24, 1895, twelve men, leading citizens heavily armed, boarded the little steamer, Lake Worth. They stood silent as the little steamer puffed up the lake toward the two-story White Courthouse in the Wilderness at Juno. The men landed at the Juno dock; the steamer stood by.

They walked down the roadbed of the narrow gauge railroad, a half-mile to the Courthouse.

Twelve men entered the Courthouse yard. The County Clerk ran out of the downstairs room where he slept with his records and he was ordered inside. The vigilantes banged on the door of the jailer's home and when the jailer saw that they were about to break the door, he unlocked it. An excited deputy inside the jail began to fire into the crowd. The fire was returned aimed at the deputy. A misspent bullet instead struck the jailer and he fell dying. There were now four dead.

A cursing Sam Lewis was pulled from his iron cage, his broken leg dragging. The hangman's noose was looped around his neck. He was hoisted toward a cross arm of the telegraph pole in the Courthouse yard. His body swung in the light breeze. For good measure the vigilantes riddled the suspended body with gunfire.

Twelve men, their mission accomplished, made their way as quickly as possible toward the dock. A solemn oath was taken never to reveal the identities of those who hung Sam Lewis. There was no local sympathy for Sam because he was responsible for the death of four well-known citizens, including a deputy and the jailer.

The Celestial Railroad was crowded the next day as the word went up and down the rivers that the dreaded Sam Lewis was dead. They came to stare at the dangling bullet-ridden corpse, to assure themselves that they had no further cause to fear Sam Lewis and his famed 44 Marlin.

History of The Palm Beach Courthouse Part-5

In the late 19th century, the area of Lake Worth and its eastern sandbar, Palm Beach remained the most primitive wild land on the U.S. Atlantic coast. Long after most early Florida settlements had been established, everyone had curiously overlooked this primitive paradise on a large fresh water lake. For a quarter-century its handful of pioneers would live an almost Robinson Crusoe existence. The Spanish, who ran the state for three centuries barely gave lake Worth a glance; the British ignored it altogether. Later, almost overnight it would no longer be a frontier wilderness.

1894 was a pivotal year in the history of our County Seat. Henry Flagler had come the year before; his plan was always the same; find an attractive place on the ocean and build the largest hotel in the world. His next step was to extend his railroad south to the Hotel. He saw Cap Dimick's 1880 lonely Hotel in Palm Beach, and miles of deserted beach, ringed by coconut palm trees. Land was purchased and the 2,000-room hotel construction started on the sandbar in May 1893. 1,000 master craftsmen, money, and goods poured into town, the lake bustled with steamers, barges, and sailboats. A small city of tents sprang up around the largest hotel in the world, which opened in 1894, Flagler's agents had come down from St. Augustine to buy the hotel site, and had paid \$30,000.00 for a tract of land west of the lake, where Flagler proposed platting a new town to be called West Palm Beach. The hotel workers built shacks in the STIX, and pitched tents near Flagler's railway "end of the line", near the ferry landing to Palm Beach. These hotel workmen had followed the crews building the railroad at \$1.25 a day.

These railroad crews, and hotel builders were looking for a little fun, evenings and weekends. Dade County had been dry except for the "Blind Tiger" stills. 1894 was the year of the whiskey referendum. It passed but restricted whiskey to the hotel and Banyan (Thirst) Street. Gamblers flocked to Banyan from all over the U.S. The wages of prostitutes in England were low. Boswell never paid more than a sixpence for a brief encounter and wages hadn't risen since. These fair-haired girls and their pimps (in Cockney: Buttock and Twang) tented and stalled on Banyan. One might imagine with all this activity going on, there would be murders, robberies, and a lot of commotion. Well that was certainly true. Our budding judicial system was being overwhelmed.

Since 1872, Dade County had been operating under a loosely working Justice of the Peace System. Seventh Circuit Judge Broome was authorized to add peaceful Dade County to his Circuit on the first Monday in May 1886, but matters got so wild in 1894 in this "Wild-West" town, the iron cage Jail in Juno couldn't hold all the prisoners. The respected town fathers came up with a rolling jail, a railroad boxcar. That worked until a "calaboose" could be built which was completed in 1894. The first inmate was a Bohemian, John H. Williams who shot a man over a game of skin. The town was incorporated on November 5, 1894 by a vote of 74 to 1. (There were only 100 voters).

The weekly Gazetteer editorialized against these 1894 dens inequity: whiskey, gambling, and prostitution. There were 17 murders since the start of the hotel construction; the victims were moved west across the street to the cemetery.

The Sheriff didn't take kindly to the Gazetteer's muckraking, and threatened to hickory whip the Editor for his clean-up crusade, then he charged the editor with criminal libel. Luckily, the Grand Jury wouldn't indict the Editor.

On January 1, 1894 there was only one building in West Palm Beach, and in two short years, we find this primitive wilderness completely changed. The town now had well made streets, hotels, churches, stores, a post office, bank, cigar factory, two printing offices, public reading room, large and well furnished school, several hundred residents, complete water plant, well drilled fire department, partly completed country road running north and south, large city dock, and a bridge crossing the lake. West Palm Beach had suddenly become the commercial hub of Dade County; it was the end of an era. All the lawyers moved their offices from Juno to West Palm Beach in 1896, but the White Courthouse in the wilderness in Juno would hold court for another three years, before being moved back to Miami.