

The Beach School

A Short History of
Fort Myers Beach Elementary



Ellie Bunting and The Estero Island
Historic Society

Background



Fort Myers Beach was settled in the late 19th century by a few hardly homesteaders who braved the elements to live on the undeveloped island.

Short History of The Beach School



Most of the early settlers made their living by farming or fishing. In 1912, William Winkler opened the first hotel on the island at the end of Pompano Street. Harold Case opened the first subdivision in 1910 with Connecticut at the center. When the first bridge was constructed in 1921, Crescent Beach, as it was known at the time, was part of the Florida Land Boom.

Short History of The Beach School

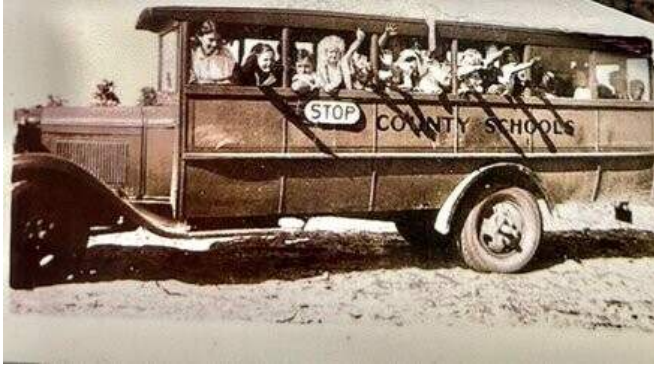
The beach became a popular destination for visitors and investors. Soon there were casinos, restaurants, and more hotels popping up to offer visitors entertainment and lodging.



Hurricanes in 1921, 1926, and 1928 brought a halt to the real estate boom for a few years as people were thinking twice about investing in “hurricane alley.”

During World War II, the beach was a popular destination for servicemen who were training in Fort Myers. Many of these men returned with their families after the war and settled on the island.

Beach School is Born



According to the National Register of Historic Places, the first school was established on Estero Island in 1890. It was open for two years before closing. In 1897, another effort was made to reopen the school, but it failed due to low attendance. Before 1937, students on the island were shipped off island to the Iona School for their education.

Short History of The Beach School

In 1937, a group of parents from the Fort Myers Beach Improvement Society went before the Lee County School Board to ask that a school be established on the island. The board offered to staff a school if the residents could provide a building to house the school.

A group of dedicated mothers raised the funds to rent the Mayhew Page Cottage for \$27.00 a month. The cottage was located on the Beach side of Estero across from Chapel by the Sea. Today, this is called Cottage Street and the original school cottage was standing until it was taken out by Hurricane Ian.



In the fall of 1937, Lois Alexander had just graduated from Florida State College for Women (now Florida State) with a degree in education.

Short History of The Beach School

She was paid \$80.00 a month to teach grades 1-3 in the one room cottage. She also paid \$12.50 a month rent and lived in the cottage. The school board furnished a desk. The first year the school opened with 11 students in first grade; 5 students in second grade; and 7 students in third grade (Bassett, AJ).

One year after the first Beach School opened on Cottage Street, it became obvious that the small cottage would need to be replaced with a larger building to accommodate the growing student population.

The Beach Improvement Society was formed to help build a new, larger school. Dudley Gaddes was the president and Mrs. Watt Harris served as secretary of the new organization.

Second Beach School



Dances were held along with bake sales as parents and community members came together and raised money to build a new school. Land on Sterling Ave was donated by MR Pence, and a wood frame schoolhouse was constructed by community members

Short History of The Beach School



The original school consisted of two classrooms and a second teacher was added as the lower grades (1-3) met in one room with a stage and the upper grades (4-6) met in the second room. The rooms were separated by a large partition. Miss Ardys Klenzing was hired to teach the upper grades and serve as the bus driver while Mrs. Congdon was a teacher, principal, and janitor (Clare Taylor).



Short History of The Beach School

The school was heated by a wood stove. The Property Owners Association donated a piano and the school board provided a bus. The mothers furnished lunches of soup for the children from a tool shed which also functioned as a lunchroom. The new school had two swings for the boys and two swings for the girls.

In 1943 a new building was added behind the original school. It served as a lunchroom and classroom for the primary grades. Later, a lunchroom was added which also served as a classroom for the upper grades. This school served the island well for about ten years.



Third Beach School



After World War II there was an influx of new children who had moved to the island with their parents who discovered the beauty of Fort Myers Beach while being stationed in Fort Myers during the war.

In 1946, the Lee County School Board sent a delegation to Tallahassee to meet with the state superintendent of schools to discuss the possibility of building a permanent school on the island. The state granted permission for a one-million-dollar bond issue to construct two new schools in the county.

Short History of The Beach School



The new school opened for students in 1948 according to the National Register of Historic Places.



Short History of The Beach School

The “new school” was built using lumber from the Old Bayshore School (officially known as the Woodrow School) which was built in 1917 and closed in 1942 when Slater’s Mill closed down and the workers moved away.

The school was torn down in 1946 and its timbers were used in building the new Beach School (Hundred Years of Lee County Public Schools).

According to an interview with the first teacher, Lois Congdon, the Beach School also used the windows and flooring from the Bayshore School in its construction.

Rolfe Schell, in the History of Fort Myers Beach, stated the following: “A wood school building from Bayshore was moved in to become the auditorium and six classrooms plus an office.” There was also a small office for the principal and a “book room” that served as a library.

Short History of The Beach School

On January 9, 1947, the New-Press ran an article about the Beach School's proposed opening. Apparently, the Beach residents were concerned about the quality of the work in the new school.

At this time, students were still attending the school on Sterling Street. They scheduled a protest to make public the defects that were found in the new school.

This protest was called a few days before the new school was scheduled to open with 75 students.

Some of the problems were peeling paint, uneven doors, leaking windows, asbestos coated blackboards, walls and floors in the bathrooms were unfinished concrete which is porous and dirty and impossible to clean.

The teachers were also upset because there were no bulletin boards, no closets, and inadequate lighting.

Short History of The Beach School

The PTA and the Beach Improvement Association convinced a judge to order a Grand Jury to look into these claims regarding the school's construction.

The Grand Jury listened to all of the evidence and concluded that the school's problems were caused by the using salvaged materials that were not up to code. This saved the school board \$20,000 on the construction but the repairs now needed to be made.

Eventually, the repairs were made, and the students were able to move into the new school.

In 1952, a lunch room was added to the property. Three years later in 1955 two more classrooms were added to make room for the growing student population. In 1962, a library and administration building were added, and five years later, two more classrooms were needed. In 1970, the cafeteria was enlarged and the original auditorium was subdivided to provide space for a media center and administrative offices (National Register).

Short History of The Beach School



The existing school has a concrete frame with lumber walls and framing (floors and ceiling).

Short History of The Beach School

As the enrollment in the new school continued to grow, the Beach Community beefed up their fund raising efforts to make sure the Beach kids had whatever the school needed. The school was a community school as the parents provided screens for the windows and a sidewalk in the front.

Each year the 6th grade (later 5th grade) class added a square with each student's name. This continued for many years until the sidewalk was torn up in the demolition.

Other fundraising paid for water fountains, landscaping, playground equipment and even a pavilion to provide shade on hot days.

Early Educators --Teachers

1. 1937--Lois Alexander
2. 1938-Artys Klensing and Lois Alexander
3. 1939--Lois Alexander and Artys Klensing
4. 1940-1942--Edith Shawcross and Lois Alexander.
5. 1943--Edith Shawcross, Mildred Bassett, Clara Harris

Early Educators--Principals

1. 1937-1944--Lois Alexander
2. 1945-1947--Clara Harris
3. 1948-1954--Ethel Tierney
4. 1955-1964--Mildred Bassett
5. 1965-1966--John Holzinger
6. 1967-1970--Richard Hering
7. 1971-1979--Bob Brodhacker
8. 1980-1983--Faye Williams
9. 1984-1990--Bob Curry
10. 1994-2002--Judy Michalski
11. 2003-2010--Carl Brunick
12. 2010-2016--Larry Woods
13. 2017-2018--Jeff Dobbins
14. 2018-2021-Karen Manzi
15. 2022-Present--Traci Kohler

Students 1937-1948

- Robley Geddes
- Jo Canady
- Mina Geddes
- George Stansbury
- Buster Blakely
- Clarence Coward
- Betty Reese
- Dorothy Sunman
- Susan Amblen
- Jim Reese
- Harold Sunman
- Pam Symonds
- Ann Stansbury
- AJ Bassett
- Connie Bassett
- Frandy Bassett
- Blanche Santini
- Fran Santini
- Joyce Thompson
- Oscan McClenithan
- Frank Underhill
- Mina Kingston
- Lavenna Yeomans
- Jack Sunman
- Bill Sunman

Notes: AJ Bassett

Short History of The Beach School

Timeline

- 1937--First school opens in Mayhew Page Cottage
- 1938--Second school opens on Sterling Avenue
- 1943--New building added to Sterling Avenue School
- 1943-1944--War Years
- 1946--35-40 students. Petition state for funds to build new school
- 1947--Construction begins on "new Beach School" using materials from the Bayshore School in North Fort Myers.
- 1948--New school is completed with six classrooms, an auditorium, two rest rooms, office, book room. Ethel Tiernney was the first principal of the new school.
- 1950s--99-134 students. Screens were donated for the windows. Shades were added to the windows. Bathrooms were tiled. School Board paid for materials but parents did the work. PTA grew to 117 members. Badges and raincoats were provided for the Safety Patrol. Bike racks added. Playground equipment installed. Pavillion constructed. Cots added to clinic. Landscaping by Garden Club.

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- 1960s--Hurricane Donna. PTA now up to 218 members. New wing added included two classrooms and a new library and administrative office. Beach Improvement Association took the school as a community project in 1962. In 1966 an additional wing was added with two classrooms and more restrooms. The courtyard was completed. The cafeteria was expanded in the late 60s.
- 1970s--The auditorium was turned into classrooms. The Kiwanis raised money to air condition the school. New furniture was donated. The first kindergarten class was opened in 1972 with Winnie Yordy as the teacher. Students attended half days. The Bicentennial mural was completed in 1976.
- 1980--Enrollment was about 200 students. The computer program began to develop. The community raised money for one computer in each classroom.

Short History of The Beach School

- 1990--\$80 K was raised by the community to build Playworks. Volunteers spent many hours building the playground for Beach students. Library became a media center with a TV studio and more computers. A computer room was added along with an art room and a music room. New air conditioning, carpet, windows, and a paint job completed the upgrades to the school.