

INTRODUCTION

Like the roots of many towns that grew up in what was then known as Mosquito County and thought of as southern Florida, the roots of Orlando sprang from a fort that was part of a proposed and ever-evolving but never finished network of American fortifications. These forts were intended to provide protection to nearby settlers and were planned to be a day's journey apart from each other so that all settlers would be within easy reach of one. The more prominent forts in the local area were Fort Christmas (to the east), Fort Maitland (to the immediate north), Fort Monroe (later Fort Mellon, near present-day Sanford, to the more distant north), and Fort Gatlin.

Fort Gatlin was a stockaded fort built on a small rise of land between Lake Gatlin, Lake Jennie Jewel, and Lake Gem Mary. Fort Gatlin's namesake was an assistant army surgeon by the name of Henry Gatlin, who was one of 105 soldiers killed in an ambush carried out by Seminole warriors on December 28, 1835. The name Orlando, according to one local legend, was also rooted in a Seminole War death: a young sentinel named Orlando Reeves, who allegedly sacrificed his life by yelling to wake his comrades and announce an ambush near what has become Lake Eola in downtown Orlando.

Seven years after the end of the "second" Seminole War (1835–1842), in November 1849, Fort Gatlin was closed. Since the soldiers were confident that troubles with the Seminoles were behind them, many decided to stay on and to relocate their families to the area. The settlement that grew up close to the fort became known as Jernigan, named after Aaron and Isaac Jernigan, two pioneer cattlemen who had arrived in 1843 with 700 head of cattle.

Two events took place in 1857 that were instrumental in determining the future of Jernigan. First, in September, a post office was authorized about three and a half miles north of the settlement, at the intersection of a supply road that ran from Fort Mellon to Fort Brooke (near present-day Tampa) and the better-known Gadsden's Trail that ran from Fort Butler (present-day Astor) to Fort Lloyd (near the northeast shore of Lake Okeechobee) and points north and south. Second, in October, a landholder named Benjamin F. Caldwell deeded four acres of land he held in that vicinity to be used by the county. The new settlement that sprang up there became known as Orlando.

Natural disasters, like major hurricanes in August 1893, September 1894, and August 1899, took their toll on the growing community. Most notable were the twin freezes in late December 1894 and on February 7, 1895, when the temperature

plummeted from a daytime high of 85°F to an overnight morning low of 17°F. The freezes killed virtually every citrus tree in the county and bankrupted seven of eight local banks. Growers, pickers, packagers, and shippers, as well as their suppliers and supporters, were suddenly out of business. A large number of them, and their families, left town, penniless and discouraged. But that disaster had one far-reaching result: it forced the young city to diversify its economy. Probably more than any other event, the Big Freeze, as the freezes of that winter came to be called, caused Orlando to develop into a regional city.

Sure, the city replanted its citrus trees—that was a business the people knew. But while those newly planted groves matured, residents returned to cattle raising, expanded their lumber and turpentine interests, and experimented with a variety of other farm crops. Perhaps most importantly, the city's board of trade increased its efforts to promote the city as a healthy retreat, a tourist destination, and a winter home to northerners. As part of one of those efforts, a contest was held to update the city's nickname. In 1908, Orlando became the "City Beautiful," a name that continues to be used almost a century later.

On the road to recovery, Orlando's population and economy grew. The number of permanent residents tripled between 1910 and 1920 and again between 1920 and 1930. During those years, the city experienced a remarkable land boom that changed its image and its focus. Several large residential areas stretched the city on the ground, while the business district grew taller, more impressive, and more important.

Also impressive were new networks of state roads and national highways that led to and passed through Orlando. The Dixie Highway network was first. It provided two signed routes—one from Michigan, another from Chicago—that brought waves of "tin can tourists" into the area. These early auto tourists carried their own food with them, much of it in tin cans, and camped in fields alongside the roadways. Before long, roadside motels and restaurants with automobile parking lots, as well as campgrounds and rest stops, sprang up to accommodate this new type of traveler.

With additional highway improvements and the acceptance of air travel by the general public, Orlando's spot as a tourist destination was sealed. Cypress Gardens, Gatorland, Xanadu, the Prince of Peace Memorial, Weeki Wachee, Silver Springs, Six Gun Territory, Circus World, and Masterpiece Gardens were some of the original attractions that drew early tourists to the area. Then, in the late 1960s, Walt Disney World came to town, and the Orlando area was never to be the same again.