



A Brief History of the Laguna Madre Area

by Rod E. Bates

Port Isabel

• Port Isabel was first occupied by Coahuiltecan Indians. By 1770, the first Spanish Colonial settlers had begun to fish the Laguna Madre.

- **1820s**, the village, then called El Fronton, was granted as part of the Potrero de Santa Isabel tract to the Garcia family. At this time the area was in the province of Nuevo Santander, Mexico, New Spain.
- **1830s and 1840s**, El Fronton was a busy port and was garrisoned by Mexican soldiers. A customs house was located near the area now occupied by the lighthouse.
- In March of **1846**, El Fronton was occupied by the U.S. Army led by General Zachary Taylor. He and his men built Fort Polk and improved the port docks. Fort Polk was the main supply depot for the northern campaign of the war with Mexico. The fort was decommissioned in **1850**. El Fronton becomes Point Isabel.
- **1849-1850** saw many gold seekers come through Point Isabel looking for a safer route to the California gold rush.
- **1852** the lighthouse is built. Young Don Chenco helps build the structure and later becomes famous posing in front of the structure for photos. Port Isabel's unofficial ambassador lives until 1949 – aged 119 years!
- **1861-1865**, Point Isabel is occupied by both Union and Confederate soldiers. The lighthouse was used as a lookout. Two small battles were fought here. Confederate Colonel John S. "Rip" Ford removes the lens and attempts to blow up the lighthouse, only succeeding in cracking it and damaging the top structure. The last battle of the Civil War, Palmito Hill, is fought 9 miles south of Point Isabel, 40 day after the South surrendered to Grant.
- **1872**, the Rio Grande Railroad opens Point Isabel up to increased trade. The line joins Point Isabel to Brownsville and Northern Mexico. Fishing booms with the increased trade, so does tourism. Many families have summer homes at "the point".
- **1916-1917** – The Mexican Revolution causes border unrest and bandits from northern Mexico take advantage of the unrest and begin to loot north of the border. Troops from Iowa and Illinois are stationed in Point Isabel to keep order.
- **1928**, the Point Isabel Land Company develops and modernizes the townsite and renames it Port Isabel.
- **1928-1936**, deep water facilities are constructed in Port Isabel and Port Brownsville making south Texas and international trade powerhouse.
- **1940s-1960s** the Port Isabel area boasts the world's largest shrimping fleet.
- **1934-Present**, the Texas International Fishing Tournament, (TIFT), becomes world famous.
- **1954**, the first Queen Isabella Causeway is opened. Before this bridge, people used passenger ferries to go to Padre Island.



General History of the Area

1519 – 1st Spanish explorers, Capt. Pineda.

1523 – Spaniard Francisco Garay Sails into Brazos Santiago Pass on July 25, Saint James Day and names the pass "El Paso de los Brazos de Santiago" (The Arms of Saint James Pass) in his honor. Brazos Island was named after the pass.

1554 – A Spanish treasure fleet left Mexico en route to Spain and was demolished by a violent hurricane. Several boats were wrecked on Padre Island and a few survivors began to walk the beach towards Vera Cruz Mexico. Some of the survivors walked through our area, only one reached Vera Cruz. The rest fell victim to the harsh elements and ferocious Indians.

1560-1700 – This area known as the Wild Horse Desert was unexplored and only inhabited by local Indians and wildlife. This was the last area of the gulf coast to be settled as it was considered the harshest environment of all areas the Spaniards desired to settle.

1749 – Colonel Jose de Escondon leads a colonization party into the Rio Grande Valley area and founds the towns of Camargo, Mier, Reynosa, and Matamoros.

Ca. 1770 – A small fishing village is located at the Point Isabel area. The village is known as "El Fronton de Santa Isabel" or El Fronton for short. The name fronton means 'bluff' or 'wall' and came from the steep face of the hill that faced the bay in the area of the fishing pier. This bluff of lightly colored clay could easily be seen from the Brazos Santiago pass.

1770s – 1840s – El Fronton was a popular summer "resort" area for ranching families of this area, enjoying the cool gulf breeze during the hot summer.

1803 – Padre Nicolas Balli is granted the barrier island which now bears his name – Padre Island.

1829 – A Mexican fort is constructed on Brazos Island to protect the Brazos de Santiago Pass.



1836 – The Texas navy "Invincible" sinks the Mexican navy gunboat "Nicolas Bravo" in the Brazos Santiago area.

1842 – Mexican customs house for the "Port of Matamoros" at El Fronton was located near the present site of the lighthouse.

1846 – General Zachary Taylor and the U.S. Army set up Fort Polk at the present site of Lighthouse Square. General Taylor renames the town "Point Isabel."

1846-48 – The "Mexican War" dramatically changes Point Isabel which becomes a boomtown. Many famous Americans served at Fort Polk/Point Isabel:

- 1) Zachary Taylor, elected President – 1850.
- 2) U.S. Grant, elected President – 1868.
- 3) Jefferson Davis, only President – CSA.

4) T.J. "Stonewall" Jackson, Lt. General – CSA.

5) Robert E. Lee, Cmd. General – CSA.

6) Winfield Scott, Cmd. General – USA.

7) Abner Doubleday – General – USA. (Famous person in baseball history.)

8) Lew Wallace, General – USA. (Author of "Ben-Hur") And many, many more notables.

1849-50 – California gold rush causes a mini-boom era at Point Isabel. Fortune seekers search for a safe route to the gold fields through Mexico. Among them, James Audubon comes through and records plants and wildlife.

1852 – Lighthouse built at Point Isabel.

1861-65 – The American Civil War has a profound impact on the Point Isabel area.

1863 – General N.P. Banks lands Union troops on Brazos Island. Confederates use the lighthouse to spy on the Union soldiers.

1864 – A small battle is fought between U.S. and Confederate soldiers at the docks by the lighthouse. Confederate Colonel John "Rip" Ford removes the light from the lighthouse so the "Yankees" can't use it. Confederate forces attempt to blow up the lighthouse as they evacuate Point Isabel. They only damage the upper structure.

1865 – The hospital at Brazos Santiago serves over 100,000 patients during the four years of the Civil War, almost all from sickness such as cholera, dysentery, and yellow fever. The last land battle of the American Civil War is fought 9 miles south of Point Isabel on May 15, 1865 between Union soldiers en route to Point Isabel and Confederates camped at Whites Ranch. Known as the Battle of Palmito Hill, the Confederates won the battle, and later had to surrender to their defeated foe.

1867 – One of the most powerful hurricanes to ever hit our area completely destroyed Clarksville, Texas, and Bagdad, Mexico. Brazos Santiago was underwater and Point Isabel was leveled.

1872 – The Rio Grande Railroad, from Point Isabel to Brownsville, begins service. Point Isabel begins to enjoy another prosperous era as a seaport and summer resort.

1884 – Coast Guard/Life Saving Service is established on the south end of Padre Island. U.S. Quarantine station is built on Brazos Island to check the spread of disease.

1880s-90s – Commercial fishing begins to be big business in Point Isabel. The shallow sloop improves the catch and vast quantities of fish are shipped by train to Brownsville and Mexico. The boat is so effective at it's job that it is outlawed by the Texas Legislature in the 1930s.

1898 – Troops from south Texas forts are deployed for the Spanish American War, and leave via steamers from Point Isabel.

1909 – A 12' deep channel is cut from Brazos to the Point Isabel docks.

1916 – U.S. soldiers are deployed to the border as a result of the increased 'bandit' activities. Troops from Iowa and Illinois are stationed at Point Isabel.

1920s - Point Isabel gains fame as a sport fishing paradise, increasing tourism.

1928 – Point Isabel Land Company modernizes and develops the townsite and renames the town Port Isabel in hopes of a deep water port. They market the project as "Building a city where a city belongs"

1933 – A devastating hurricane hits Port Isabel and disrupts life throughout south Texas. Much of Port Isabel goes underwater.

1934 – The first Texas International Fishing Tournament is a smash success.

1936 – The Brownsville ship channel is finished and Port Brownsville officially opens.

1943-45 – WW2 causes alerts at Port Isabel, U-Boats are sunk in the gulf.

1954 – 1st Queen Isabella Causeway opens. The area begins a vigorous period of growth and development.

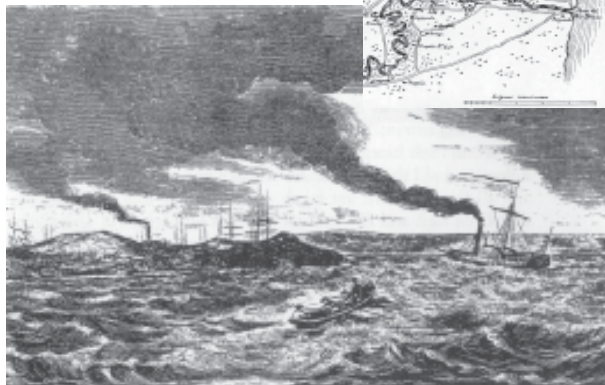
1974 – New Queen Isabella Causeway opens.

2001 – Barge hits the bridge and knocks out a section, 8 lives were lost.



BRAZOS ISLAND

- **Brazos Island** was originally inhabited by the Coahuiltecan Indians.
- In **1519**, Alonzo de Pineda and his party explored the area around Brazos Island.
- In **1523**, on Saint James Day, Captain Francisco Garay anchored his boat in the pass and named it the Arms of Saint James Pass in his honor, "El Paso de Brazos de Santiago". This is the oldest place name still in use in the area.
- The survivors of the wrecked **1554** silver fleet passed over Brazos Island in the attempt to reach Vera Cruz.
- In **1829**, Mexico built a fort on the north end of Brazos Island to protect the inlet, harbor and customs house.
- In **1836**, the Texas Navy ship "Invincible" sunk the Mexican Navy ship "Nicolas Bravo" off Brazos Island somewhere near the pass.
- In **1846**, the U.S. Army used the port at Brazos Island as a supply port and the main point for troops to disembark.
- In **1849-1850**, Brazos Island was the landing port for gold seekers heading for the California gold fields.
- During the early years of the Civil War, **1861-63**, the Confederates used the port of Brazos Santiago to export cotton and import arms. In late 1863, Union general Nathaniel P. Banks blockaded the port and landed several thousand troops. The port was controlled by the Union army for the remainder of the war.
- In **1866**, U.S. General Phil Sheridan built a railroad from the port of Brazos Santiago to Whites Ranch, about 9 miles, to help move supplies. This was the 4th railroad to exist in Texas. The 1867 hurricane destroyed the line. This is the storm that wiped out Brazos Santiago, Texas, Clarksville, Texas, and Bagdad, Mexico as well. Point Isabel and Brownsville were also heavily damaged.
- **1870s-1900**, Brazos Island functioned as a port and quarantine station. Most of the residents of Brownsville went to Brazos Island or Boca Chica beach to swim, not Padre.
- **1900s-1930**, Boca Chica was the most popular area beach. A new resort was built, Del Mar, and featured rentable huts, a dance hall, a restaurant and a beach playground facility. It was during this era that the Boca Chica pass filled in.
- **1933**, the famous hurricane destroys all buildings etc. on Brazos Island and Boca Chica beach.
- **1934-35**, the pass is deepened between the jetties for the Brownsville ship channel. The spoils were dumped between Clark Island and Brazos Island right where ships once anchored, now the highest hill in the Boca Chica area.
- The **Boca Chica** beach area fell into further despair with the opening of the Queen Isabella Causeway from Port Isabel to South Padre Island, in 1954.



PADRE ISLAND

- **Padre Island** was first occupied by an Indian tribe known as the Coahuiltecan. Reports of cannibalistic Karankawa Indians mostly happened north of present day Corpus Christi, though hunting parties may have explored as far south as the Brazos Santiago pass area.
- Padre Island was probably first seen and explored by Spaniard Alonzo de Pineda and his crew in **1519**.
- In **1523**, Spanish Explorer Francisco Garay explored the southern end of Padre Island and named the inlet between Padre and Brazos Islands "El Paso de los Brazos de Santiago" or the Arms of Saint James Pass. As he anchored there on St. James Day. Padre Island was then known as "Isla Malhado" or Island of Misfortune.
- In **1554** a fleet bearing treasure for the Spanish crown was wrecked on Padre Island by a hurricane. About 300 souls survived and began to march south along Padre, trying to reach Vera Cruz Mexico. The elements and hostile Indians besieged the Spaniards, and only one man reached the safety of Vera Cruz. This story is known as the Flight of the 300. This treasure fleet is the one that deposited the silver coins often found on Padre.
- In **1803**, Padre Nicolas Balli was granted the island by the Spanish crown. The island is named for him.
- Ca. **1848**, John Singer, brother of the famous sewing machine inventor, was shipwrecked on Padre Island with his family. They found shelter in Padre Balli's Satna Cruz Ranch, long abandoned. They resettled the ranch and lived there until the Civil War forced them to leave. Mr. Singer buried most of the family wealth near his ranch and planned to retrieve it after the war. Before his return, a hurricane swept the island and all familiar landmarks were lost. Singer never found his money!



- In **1884**, the United States Life Saving Service – later, the U.S. Coast Guard built a station on the south end of the Padre Island near the Brazos Santiago Pass.
- In the early **1920s** the Casino Hotel was built near present day Schlitterbahn. The **1933** hurricane badly damaged the structure. Time did the rest. Patrons rode over to Padre via a ferry.
- In **1934** the jetties were constructed to protect the inlet to the pass and the Brownsville ship channel.
- In **1954** the Queen Isabella Causeway opens. A real estate and tourism boom on Padre.
- In **1974** the "new" Queen Isabella Causeway opened.

Other Points of Interest

- **Clarksville, Texas and Bagdad, Mexico** are now ghost towns at the mouth of the Rio Grande River, but during the 1840's-1860's this pair of commercial powerhouses were the busiest places in the area! Known for their lawlessness and loose morals, a priest dubbed them Sodom and Gomorrah of the New World. It was reported that every house was a saloon and whiskey was cheaper than water! Criminals from Texas sought refuge in Bagdad and vice-versa. The famous pirate Jean Lafitte is said to have married a woman from Bagdad. During the Mexican War and the Civil War the two towns were camp locations for the Army and Naval landing ports.
- **Whites Ranch** was located about 6 miles from the mouth of the river near Tarpon Bend. The ranch was at the junction of the river road and the Boca Chica Road and was frequently used by the army as a campsite. Confederate troops were camped here prior to the Palmito Hill battle. White Ranch was the terminus point of the railroad, built by General Phil Sheridan, from Brazos Santiago. The last battle of the Civil War was fought around Whites Ranch. The exact location of the HQ is not known and was reportedly swallowed by a river flood many years ago.
- **Palmito Ranch** was located at Palmito Hill, on the Rio Grande River, 14 miles up stream from the mouth. It gives it's name to the last battle of the Civil War because the confederated were encamped at the ranch when the Union army was spotted marching on their position. The rebel forces hid in the brush until the Yankee troops came into range. The surprise attack sent the Union lines in retreat. A running battle ensued that lasted 14 miles to the coast. The Confederates won the battle, the Civil War's last land battle. This conflict was fought over 40 days after Robert E. Lee surrendered at Appomattox, Virginia. The Union Forces were marching to Point Isabel.
- **South Bay** is a very shallow bay south of the Brownsville ship channel below the Laguna Madre bay. Originally, the deepest water was located between Clark and Brazos Islands, now the highest hill on Boca Chica beach. Spoils from the Brownsville ship channel were piled up at that point. Only the western pass, located on the west side of Clark Island, remains. The small pass at the southeast end of South Bay was known as the Boca Chica pass (or Small Mouth) and water passed through it between the south end of Brazos Island and the Texas mainland. Boca Chica pass now lends it's name to the whole beach area between the Brazos Santiago pass and the mouth of the Rio Grande River. The Boca Chica pass has been closed for decades. The residents of Brazos Island are said to have gotten fresh water in the middle of South Bay because a branch of the Rio Grande River broke off just west of Whites Ranch and flowed into the bay! A small wooden bridge forded this water flow just west of Whites Ranch. This branch has not existed since the early 1900's. El Ostional is a famous oyster fishery in the Southwest corner of South Bay. These oysters are considered by many the "world's finest". South Bay is a unique fishery today!
- The **Brownsville Ship Channel** was begun in 1934 and completed in 1936. Full length 18 miles. The Port of Brownsville along with Port Isabel boasted the largest shrimping fleet in the world in the 1950's and 1960's. The Port of Brownsville and Port Isabel are the only deep water port facilities for 200 miles, north or south, and serves all of south Texas and northern Mexico.
- There are rumored **Spanish galleons** at the bottom of the shallow Laguna Madre! Apparently as some ships were beached by hurricanes the tidal surge was deep enough for some vessels to wash over the Island into the bay. Many wrecks are found in the Laguna Madre to be sure, but which ones are Spanish is not known.



Courtesy of Rio Bravo Gallery

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