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PONCE LIGHTHOUSE & MUSEUM

CONSTANCE D. HUNTER HISTORIC PACETTI HOTEL MUSEUM

Pacetti Hotel



The Pacetti Hotel is one of the oldest surviving structures in all of Volusia County. Though the building itself was constructed in the 1880s, the land around it has records dating back to the New Smyrna settlement developed by Dr. Andrew Turnbull in 1768. Antonio Pons II, a young Spaniard and member of that expedition, started working the land just north of

Mosquito Inlet after the New Smyrna settlement failed. Pons' ownership of the land became official in 1803 when a Spanish royal decree rewarded his loyalty to Spain for 175 acres on the inlet's north shore. By 1828, Pons' widow Benita Usina had acquired some adjacent lands, bringing the total to 320 acres.

In 1842, Bartola Clemente Pacetti, a descendent of these New Smyrna settlers, moved onto the Pons land grant at Mosquito Inlet and began tending an orange grove there. He made his living by many means, including scavenging shipwrecks, piloting boats through the inlet, and offering his services as a fishing guide. In 1861, Bartola married Martha Jane Wickwire at the nearby Dun-Lawton Plantation. The couple stayed there for a few years to avoid Civil War naval skirmishes at the inlet.

After the war, Bartola constructed a small cottage on the Halifax River close to the Inlet. The Pacettis began taking in boarders and guiding them on a fishing and sight-seeing expeditions. In 1881, the Pacettis constructed a larger boarding house located directly next their little cottage. This new home, the Pacetti Hotel, drew even more visitors to the area and their lively business guiding tourists and fishermen would eventually result in the inlet's charter fishing industry that still thrives today.

After selling some of their land, such as the $400 sale of 10 acres to the government to build a lighthouse nearby, Bartola and Martha completed a two-story addition to the rear of their boarding house around 1886. This addition consisted of a caretaker room, a kitchen, a rear porch, and as many as seven extra bedrooms for guests. This was the first real hotel in the small community of Ponce Park, which eventually became the town of Ponce Inlet that we know today.

Bartola Pacetti died in 1898, leaving the Pacetti Hotel to be run by Martha and her remaining children. She did so until 1917, when she too passed away. The popularity of Ponce Park and the Pacetti Hotel continued to flourish into the 1920s as the Florida real estate boom was in full swing. The Pacetti Hotel was sold in 1920 to Elizabeth and Fred Phares, of Lexington, Kentucky. The Phares used the Hotel as a clubhouse where they held various balls and dancing parties until the untimely death of Mrs. Phares a year later.

The hotel was again sold, this time to Jean Long, from Clymer, Pennsylvania, who used it as a winter home. Eventually the ownership of the property was split between her and a family member named Edmund Widdowson, a wealthy land speculator and businessman also from the same area. The building's use as a hotel had come to an end, though it remained a picturesque winter retreat. After Long and Widdowson died, their heirs sold the property to Olivia Gamble in 1936. She was the daughter of James N. Gamble of Procter and Gamble

fame. She purchased the property to honor the memory of her father who loved the area and was reported to have stayed and fished at the hotel many times prior.

Olivia Gamble undertook a major restoration of the property in 1937, and it was then that the two rooflines of the building were joined, giving the hotel the appearance of a single structure. A concrete seawall and a new dock were constructed, a fresh coat of paint was applied to the building, some windows were replaced, and she also arranged for a street entrance gate to be installed at the property's driveway. The Pacetti Hotel of today looks much the same as it did after this 1930s restoration.

Olivia Gamble did not live in the Pacetti Hotel. Instead, when in Florida she resided at another house in Daytona owned by the Gamble estate. She used the hotel to host her friends and social events. After her death in 1961, the property was willed to her nephew, Louis Nippert, also from Cincinnati, Ohio. Louis and his wife Louise Nippert were socially prominent philanthropists in Cincinnati. They created a suite for themselves on the Pacetti Hotel's second floor in which they stayed during their Florida visits. The Nipperts were also the owners of the Cincinnati Reds baseball team during the Reds' most successful years that saw them win the 1975 and 1976 World Series. When the Reds were in Florida for spring training each year, they stopped by the Pacetti Hotel to celebrate and unwind.

In 1970, the Nipperts hired local couple Billy Joe Potts and Virginia Ann Caneer as resident caretakers for the Pacetti Hotel. Living right next-door to the Ponce Inlet Lighthouse, Ann and Billy Joe became involved with a group of local citizens who worked to save the light station that had fallen into disrepair. This group not only saved the light station but also developed the site into a National Historic Landmark and a world-class museum. Ann became the museum's first executive director. The couple soon split up, but Ann continued to live and work at the Pacetti Hotel for a total of forty years, hosting guests and maintaining the property so that it remains standing today.

Ann Caneer retired from the Ponce Inlet Lighthouse Preservation Association in 2008 and moved to Alabama in 2010 to be near her family. The Pacetti Hotel no longer had a resident caretaker. Ann passed away a year later, as did Louise Nippert. The Pacetti Hotel property was deeded to the Greenacres Foundation, an Ohio non-profit founded by the philanthropy of Louis and Louise Nippert. The building then remained unused for nearly a decade while the Greenacres Foundation contemplated what to do with the site.

On October 2, 2019, the Pacetti Hotel was officially purchased by the Ponce de Leon Inlet Lighthouse Preservation Association for $1.7 million. That date marked the beginning of a new chapter in the history of this significant structure. The Pacetti Hotel that began its life as an isolated fishing resort for visitors from all over the country was about to be restored to

showcase the hotel's history, its connection with the Ponce Inlet Lighthouse, and its significance to the local community. In late 2020, the Pacetti Hotel was officially listed on the National Register of Historic Places after a lengthy year-long process — through a global pandemic, no less.

Around the same time, the Pacetti Hotel restoration project received major support from a local charitable foundation. Enthused by the project, the Paul B. and Constance D. Hunter Foundation generously decided to aid in our preservation efforts by granting us $1.5 million as well as agreeing to match donations up to $250,000 towards this ambitious project. This tremendous generosity greatly facilitated the restoration of the Pacetti Hotel, especially in a period of worldwide financial uncertainty that saw a massive increase in construction costs. In fact, later on during the restoration of the site, the Hunter Foundation increased the donation by another $250,000, bringing their contribution total to over $2 million for this project. The timely restoration of the Constance D. Hunter Historic Pacetti Hotel Museum would not have been possible without their incredible assistance.

While these events were unfolding, countless meetings and discussions took place between the Ponce Inlet Lighthouse Preservation Association staff, historic preservation architects, various engineers, and Ponce Inlet town officials. This process lasted for over three years and culminated in a set of construction documents that included plans to restore nearly every facet of the Pacetti Hotel site. Once these documents were finalized, contracts were drawn up, materials were purchased, contractors were selected, and major restoration work began.

Windows and doors were restored, floors reinforced, a new dock was constructed, climate control was added, fire suppression systems were installed, and much more was done to ensure that the Contance D. Hunter Historic Pacetti Hotel Museum could be enjoyed by current and future generations.

While this restoration was ongoing, museum staff continued designing exhibits and acquiring historic artifacts relating to the Pacetti Hotel, many of which were original to the building itself. Museum exhibits were also written and designed for the many rooms and hallways of this 5,000+ square-foot building. Artifacts including beds, chairs, tables, sofas, display cases, dressers, wash stands, steamer trunks, a piano, porcelain dishes, glassware, candleholders, and much more were all donated by various visitors and volunteers.

The newly restored Constance D. Hunter Historic Pacetti Hotel Museum officially opened to the public in summer 2024, nearly a century after its doors first closed to the public. It

remains one of Volusia County's oldest and best-preserved historic structures, and a fine example of late-1800s Florida Cracker architecture.