



Gardner “Mike” Cowles, Jr.

Gardner “Mike” Cowles, Jr. (1903–1985) was a prominent American publisher, entrepreneur, and civic-minded visionary whose influence extended from national media to the early development of Port St. Lucie. Born in Algona, Iowa, he became a leading figure in publishing as co-founder and publisher of *Look* magazine and an executive of the Des Moines Register and Tribune Company.

During World War II, Cowles took a leave from publishing to serve as deputy director of the Office of War Information. In 1942, he accompanied Wendell L. Willkie

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River Park: The Beginning of a Community

River Park opened for public inspection on November 24, 1956, as one of the largest planned developments in the state of Florida. The land had previously been part of the Sharrett Ranch until its purchase in the 1950s by Look magazine, Inc. Under the leadership of its president, Gardner “Mike” Cowles Jr., the St. Lucie River Land Company was formed in 1953, and the planning for a new community soon began.

Just three years later, River Park opened as a retirement community. Lots went on sale December 1, 1956, followed by home sales beginning January 1, 1957. Among the earliest residents were Mr. Guy Clark and his wife Gladys, who moved into their home on Arbor Avenue in July 1958. Earlier, in December 1957, the Shenandoah family and their two young children selected a home from the 15 model homes available in the development. The first child born in River Park was Margaret Cooper, born to Mr. and Mrs. W.G. Cooper.

In a unique nod to local heritage, the St. Lucie River Land Company

hired a group of Seminole Indians to construct a log and thatched shelter house at Osceola Park off Rio Mar Lane.

River Park grew rapidly. By February 24, 1957, the first section of the development was completely sold out. Residents began receiving mail service on November 30, 1958, as construction continued throughout the area—including work on the bridge crossing the St. Lucie River.

Originally, River Park was bounded by U.S. 1 to the east, the river to the west, Prima Vista Boulevard to the south, and Oleander Avenue to the north. Rio Mar Boulevard—its name meaning “river to sea”—served as the main thoroughfare, ending in an oval at Prima Vista. The community’s first shopping center, located at Prima Vista and U.S. 1, included a 7-Eleven, a hardware store with a post office, a pharmacy, a barber shop, a cleaner, Dr. Ross’s office, and a gas station.

By 1959, the Prima Vista bridge over the St. Lucie River was completed. That same year, the Port St. Lucie Yacht Club and Marina opened, quickly becoming the social heart of River Park. Cont. p.3

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Membership Memo

A warm welcome and special thanks to new member Stan North of PGA Verano, who not only secured memberships for himself and his wife but also generously sponsored five additional new members. Your support helps our society continue to grow and thrive

Congratulations to member Wayne Landry on his recent appointment as an ambassador for the City of Port St. Lucie. This is a well-deserved honor, and we are proud to have your leadership represented in the community

Marilyn Lawless, widow of Mayor James Lawless, passed away on March 7, 2026, and will be remembered for her deep love and dedication to the city she and her husband proudly called home. A valued member of the Wise Women Club and Impact100, she brought passion, generosity, and a strong sense of community to all she did. Her passing is a profound loss to those who knew her, and she will be deeply missed.



The new year began on a high note as Deanne Davis, Bruce Reinoldt, and I spent a day immersed in local heritage at the 9th Annual Treasure Coast History Festival, held at the St. Lucie County Regional History Center in Fort Pierce. Events like this remind us how rich and vibrant our shared past truly is. If you've never attended and have an interest in St. Lucie County history, I strongly encourage you to mark your calendar for next year.

With a continued focus on expanding awareness of the new Port St. Lucie History Museum and Education Center, Deanne Davis and I attended the St. Lucie County Cultural Alliance meeting on January 12, hosted at the National Navy UDT-SEAL Museum. This gathering brought together Indian River State College's music and drama departments,

Curator's Corner

By Donnita Graben



the Sunrise Theatre, and local hospitality partners. Together, we explored collaborative ways to promote the county's diverse arts and entertainment offerings.

On January 15, we were pleased to host the Youth Council of St. Lucie County at the museum. This impressive group of young leaders serves as an advisory body, offering valuable insight on community decisions, policies, and budgeting. Their dedication to civic engagement and leadership development is inspiring, and we were honored to share our space and mission with them.

February brought another wave of activity. On the first of the month, Deanne Davis and I had the pleasure of speaking at the Shalom Club at Del Webb, where we shared the history of Port St. Lucie. We enjoyed a warm reception, engaging conversation, and a delicious breakfast among an accomplished and welcoming group

Throughout the month, the museum hosted several tours, including visitors from the Del Webb community in Tradition—an active adult community for those aged 55+—as well as members of the Rio Lindo Garden Club. Established in 1960, the Rio Lindo Garden Club is one of Port St. Lucie's oldest civic organizations, contributing significantly to the Botanical Gardens and numerous community initiatives. It was a privilege to welcome both groups and share the evolving story of our city.

Behind the scenes, exhibit development continued steadily. I was pleased to add a new Port St. Lucie Athletic Association (PSLAA) exhibit and begin work on exhibits highlighting Port St. Lucie Little League, as well as the growth of St. Lucie West and Tradition.

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. The marina featured a swimming pool, boat ramps, docks, a trampoline, shuffleboard courts, pool tables, ping pong, and meeting spaces for local clubs and church congregations.

Also in 1959, Sportsman's Park opened with modest meaningful amenities: a slide, a swing set, a merry-go-round, and a basketball court. For children living on nearby streets such as Solaz, Bonita, Sandia, Floresta, and Naranja, it became the cherished gathering place.

As the community expanded, so did its institutions. Port St. Lucie United Methodist Church was the first church established, followed by First Baptist Church of Port St. Lucie and the Lutheran Church of St. Andrew, all located near the ballpark. A few years later, St. Lucie Catholics,

Church completed the row of early religious institutions along Prima Vista Boulevard.

The 1970s brought significant growth and civic engagement, driven in large part by local organizations such as the Anglers Club, the Port St. Lucie Junior Woman's Club, the Rio Lindo Garden Club, Port St. Lucie Rotary Club and the Port St. Lucie Exchange Club. Their efforts led to the creation of a community center, a library, and a wide range of social activities.



Here at the Marina and Yacht Club, you're in the very center of Port St. Lucie's social and recreational life. The accent, of course, is on the water—with the fine sailing, boating, fishing, swimming and water skiing that's to be had every day. But that's only the beginning. Club meetings . . . card nights . . . happy . . . special programs like water shows, July 4th, Halloween and New Year's Eve parties . . . close harmony singing for barber-shop and beauty salon quartets complete for your company. No doubt about it — there's something for everyone who lives in Port St. Lucie.

. Around 1974–1975, River Park welcomed its first school, Port St. Lucie Elementary School, and by the end of the decade, its first supermarket, Winn-Dixie.

River Park was more than the beginning of Port St. Lucie—it was the foundation of a lasting community. What began as an ambitious development has grown into a vibrant neighborhood, shaped by the people who built not just homes, but a shared sense of place that continues to this day.

Cowles

on a global tour that inspired the influential book *One World*, helping build bipartisan support for President Franklin D. Roosevelt's wartime policies. After the war, Cowles relocated to New York to focus on *Look*, while maintaining leadership ties to his Iowa-based media interests.

In the 1950s, Cowles turned his attention to Florida's Treasure Coast, purchasing approximately 8,500 acres along the North Fork of the St. Lucie River. There, he envisioned and developed River Park as an affordable retirement community, contributing to the region's early growth.

In April 1962, he was appointed by President John F. Kennedy as a civilian advisor during the Cuban Missile Crisis, reflecting his stature in national affairs.

Cowles's legacy blends journalism, public service, and regional development—marking him as a significant figure in both American media history and the early shaping of Port St. Lucie.

Curator continued

Each addition helps paint a fuller picture of the community's development and the people who have shaped it. I also wrote and submitted for 3 grants in the hopes of improving the museum exhibits and buying much needed equipment.

March was filled with meetings and planning sessions, but also provided opportunities to connect with the broader community. Deanne and I joined the St. Lucie County Historical Society at the St. Lucie Fair, where we shared a booth to promote the museum and its programs. It was wonderful to meet so many residents and visitors interested in local history.

We also began planning for several exciting upcoming initiatives, including the City of Port St. Lucie's 65th Birthday Celebration, the first annual Historical Quilting Exhibit and the first annual Port St. Lucie History Bus Tour. Additionally, I met with representatives from one of the city's earliest Little League organizations to gather materials and stories for an upcoming exhibit.

It has been a strong and encouraging start to the year, filled with collaboration, outreach, and progress. There is much more to come, and I look forward to sharing it with you in the months ahead.



City News

A new 13-acre park officially opened at the Port District on Wednesday, March 4, with a ribbon-cutting ceremony. Known as *The Preserve*, the site features approximately half a mile of scenic trails and elevated walkways, with connections to the boardwalk along the North Fork of the St. Lucie River.

The park stands on land once home to the historic Burt Pruitt Fishing Camp, blending natural beauty with a nod to the area's past. The Preserve offers residents and visitors a chance to experience both the environmental and historical significance of this waterfront location.



Notes from the Chair

Greetings!

Welcome to the renewal of our quarterly newsletter for the Port St. Lucie Historical Society. We have much to share, as there have been many exciting improvements to both the Museum and the organization.

This quarter, we are pleased to welcome several new Board members: LM “Butch” Post, John Greenfield, Bruce Reinholdt, and Deanne Davis, who has returned to the Board.

Our curator, Donnita Graben, has been actively engaged in the community, participating in outreach events with local HOAs, the St. Lucie County Historical Society, and St. Lucie County schools. We were also proud to present at the Boys & Girls Club Community Luncheon.

Looking ahead, several events are on the horizon. We are preparing for the unveiling of our new brick garden in front of the Museum. While the exact date has not yet been set, we anticipate it will take place in early June. Additionally, on June 8, the Society will host a historical bus tour throughout the city, featuring stops at the Shell Bazaar, Clover Park, and the Sandpiper Resort. This event is currently sold out; however, a waiting list is being established for an additional tour planned for October. If you are interested, please visit our website and sign up, as seating is limited.

Please note an important update to our membership dues structure. Annual fees are now due on January 1 of each year and submitted no later than March 1. Members may renew online at www.pslhistory.org or by mailing a check to the Port St. Lucie Historical Society, 2456 SE Westmoreland Blvd., Port St. Lucie, Florida 34952. If you have not received your renewal membership notice, please contact Stephanie Morgan at Treasurer@pslhistory.org.

As you can see, there is a great deal happening. Thank you for your continued support of our Society and Museum.

Sincerely,
Nate Spera
Chair

UPCOMING EVENTS

- On July 16th, a Music Bingo fundraising event will be held at the 19th Hole Pub at the Saint’s Golf Course.
- Our October gathering will be on the 14th, speaker to be determined
- As part of our recognition of the 250th anniversary of our Declaration of Independence, the Society is hosting a historical quilting exhibit that will run from November 2nd until the 17th.

