

THE OLD FLORIDA PROJECT

ARCHITECTURE | LANDSCAPE | FORGOTTEN TOWNS



SOPHIA RENEE



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FOREWORD

Florida is a place of mysteries. Beyond the crowded beaches and theme parks frequented by tourists are ancient stories waiting to be told. The terms Old Florida, Lost Florida, and Forgotten Florida are well known to natives of a certain age. They conjur up images of a another era, where the towns are smaller and the shores lining the Gulf of Mexico are largely deserted.

This work is a historic record, and a love letter. With it, I hope to honor the spirit of Old Florida and share some of it's weathered, storied history with you.

State roads in Florida meander through big cities, forgotten towns, rolling farmland, and often end at the water. These are the jewels of **my** lifelong Florida adventure. These are the places I wear on my soul.

I hope you enjoy them as much as I do.

Sophia Renee



CEDAR KEY

Cedar Key is one of the last true examples of what is often referred to as "Old Florida." Time stands still on this tiny island at the very end of SR 24 in the heart of the state's beautiful and remote Nature Coast. There are no stoplights here. There is only one small, locally owned and operated grocery store. The quiet streets are peppered with art galleries, charming restaurants offering fresh catch, and weather-beaten fishermen's cottages.

The decaying Thomas Guest House aka to locals as The Honeymoon Cottage, pictured above, is an iconic part of the Cedar Key landscape and it's often immortalized by painters, photographers, and by those who visit. Originally built in 1959 and connected to the mainland by a boardwalk, the small wooden structure once served as a weekend getaway for a wealthy Gainesville family before falling into disrepair around 1985.

It's not the first time I've photographed the structure. In 2009, I photographed the cottage and other parts of Cedar Key in black and white. Technically, the photographs were fine, but I felt like something was missing. In 2013, I returned to Cedar Key to reinterpret its rustic beauty, this time in color. Instead of focusing on the cottage itself as I had done previously, I decided to absorb the richness of its surrounding textures. By incorporating the rocks on the beach and more of the sky and water, the landscape takes on a whole different feel. I took a similar approach when shooting the abandoned docks.



SULPHUR SPRINGS WATER TOWER

There is an iconic landmark in Tampa, Florida that has fascinated me for as long as I can remember. As a child growing up in the area, I would often catch glimpses of it from the interstate. I even remember playing with my sister and our babysitter in the public fresh water spring that once surrounded the property. Curious, I would often ask my mother (a Tampa native) about the history of the place and she would simply say, "It's just a water tower. It's been here forever." I can't blame my mom for not indulging me. In the 1970's and through much of the 1980's, that seemed to be the general consensus in Tampa. To most people you asked, it was "just a water tower."

However, the Sulphur Springs Water Tower, which still looms over the intersections of Bird St. and 275 N, is so much more than that. Although it may seem like an unlikely inclusion in this body of work, to the people who grew up in Tampa this decaying structure is as familiar as Ybor City, Busch Gardens, or any of the surrounding beaches that have made our area famous.

The history of the tower is a fascinating and storied one. It was built by architect Grover Poole in 1927 for an early Florida land developer/dreamer named Josiah Richardson. Richardson hoped to create an amusement park and community along the Hillsborough River, something reminiscent of New York's Coney Island. It eventually dawned on him that to make his dream a reality, he would need a dependable supply of water. Instead of a typical Florida water tower, he decided to construct a tower that resembled a medieval castle.

For the foundation, his construction crew excavated 45 feet straight into the rock and down to a spring. Above ground, the tower rose 214 feet. The construction cost \$180,000—an astronomical sum of money at the time. Richardson began by installing a vast shopping arcade that many historians have called Florida's first mall. Eventually, the grounds grew to include a huge water slide, a bathhouse and an alligator farm. He also built a hotel and tourist cottages. And the dazzling centerpiece of his dream development was The Tower, which could be seen from miles away. For a while, it seemed to work. Tourists came from the North to splash in the fresh water spring and enjoy the lazy, laid-back atmosphere—a respite from those cold, miserable winters that never touched our state. However, Richardson's dream was compromised when a flood overwhelmed the property in 1933. His attempts to recover were futile. The Great Depression soon bore down on America, killing Florida tourism. Richardson lost his fortune and soon saw his dream property divided by the interstate. The shopping arcade was leveled to make way for the dog track. The property fell into disrepair. By the time he died, Tampa was becoming another place entirely.



The Sulphur Springs Water Tower located in Tampa, Florida. Built in 1927 by Grover Poole, it still stands near the intersection of Bird Street and 275 N.

But the tower survived, and the colorful misinformation and local folklore surrounding it began to take shape. There were countless stories, half-truths and complete inaccuracies regarding its origins passed down through two generations of Tampa natives. Only the most ardent of our local historians knew the real story behind Josiah Richardson's colossal monument. The years went on. No longer a tourist attraction, the tower seemed more an eye sore than a landmark. It became a gathering place for the homeless, the grounds and structure littered with trash and graffiti. Eventually, a high fence was built around the property and workers were instructed to seal the tower doors with concrete. It remained untouched for decades, but continued to operate as a private water facility, piping artesian well water to commercial and residential customers in the immediate vicinity until 1971. When city planners and developers began contemplating what to do with the property in the 1980's, there were talks of building a high-rise condominium, a mixed-use town center, a shopping center, etc... but interest waned and funding never came through. In 2002, a large chain drugstore lobbied to obtain the property and build on the site, but public outcry from preservationists and residents killed the sale. The City of Tampa eventually obtained the land and installed lights around the tower for nighttime illumination. The property is now officially known as River Tower Park. Today, the tower remains. Tall and proud, it continues to soar over the landscape like something out of an old Twilight Zone episode. However oddly out of place it may seem in these modern times, the structure endures as an intriguing and mysterious remnant of a bygone era. An accidental icon, it is a curious architectural symbol of our city's history and a powerful testament to one man's dream for the Florida he loved.

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This is an excerpt from an original photographic essay by

SOPHIA RENEE

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