

Seffner

**Lake Hooker
Lake Thonotosassa
LakeWeeks**

9 pgs

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**HILLSBOROUGH COUNTY
HISTORIC RESOURCES SURVEY REPORT**

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Seffner (Simmon's Hammock & Lenna City)

Seffner's history can be traced back to before the Armed Occupation Act of 1842, making it one of Hillsborough County's earliest communities. Just southeast of Lake Thonotosassa and consisting of the present-day communities of Seffner and Dover, the area was originally known as Simmon's Hammock. Reverend Daniel Simmon migrated from Savannah, Georgia, in 1829 to establish a Baptist mission to convert Seminole Indians living near Lake Thonotosassa. During the next seven years the Howard and Sanders families followed in the preacher's footsteps, establishing farms in Simmon's Hammock. This era of Simmons Hammock was cut short with the beginning of the Second Seminole War in late 1835. Reportedly, a group of Native Americans warned Reverend Simmon that war was imminent because many Seminoles did not want to be pushed off their land south of Tampa Bay. The members of the three households in the hammock fled to the protection of Fort Brooke. Several months later, Rev. Simmon, his wife, and their daughter moved to Mobile, Alabama. They were fortunate, for on December 28, 1835, Major Francis Dade and 110 men marching from Fort Brooke to Fort King were attacked by Seminole Indians and their maroon allies. Only three of Dade's command survived the attack. In February 1836, Major-General Edmond P. Gaines led approximately 980 soldiers through Simmon's Hammock on their way to investigate the Dade massacre. Gaines reported that the three homesteads were burned to the ground.ⁱ

The Second Seminole War effectively stopped people from moving into the region. However, the Armed Occupation Act of 1842 breathed new life into the hammock, with several people either claiming or homesteading property including John Parker, Laburn Burnett, William Hooker, Thomas Weeks, John Weeks, Edmund Lee, James Goff, Seth Howard, James Glasgow, John C. White, and James White. Settling near present-day Dover, Captain John Parker moved from Sampson County, North Carolina, to Alachua County, Florida, in 1831. After fighting in the Second Seminole War, Parker homesteaded 160 acres in 1843 in Township 29 South, Range 21 East, Section 8. Besides raising cattle, Parker served as sheriff and was elected to the Board of County Commissioners. In 1850, Parker was listed a 32 year old farmer owning \$500 worth of property. Eleven people resided in the Parker house, ranging in age from two to 60, with four classified as having attended school in the past year. Six years later, Parker moved to Manatee County. By 1860 approximately 50 homesteads had been established between what would become Seffner and Lake Thonotosassa.ⁱⁱ

The Civil War brought tremendous changes to Simmon's Hammock. Many of its White residents left, leaving the newly emancipated slaves behind. One such example was Samuel B. Todd who in the 1850 Census was listed as a 30-year-old recently married minister that owned \$250 worth of property. After the Civil War he left his former slaves his cotton plantation who went on to farm the land. Occupying the abandoned land, many of the former slaves became successful farmers. More African Americans moved into Simmons Hammock as racial violence escalated throughout surrounding counties in the 1870s and 1880s.ⁱⁱⁱ Whites also moved onto the recently vacated lands, but in some instances did not fare as well as their African American counterparts. Despite the influx

of new settlers, much of Simmon's Hammock remained sparsely settled. Mrs. Mary Catherine (Barnwell) Williams moved from Alabama to Hillsborough County with her family in December 1868. She was just a young girl at the time, but she recounted the experience with great detail providing a glimpse into rural Hillsborough County life. Leaving Alabama because of W.K. Barnwell's, Mrs. William's father, health, the family arrived in Tampa and began looking for a home:

My father went out the next few days and looked for a farm. So he found a small place of only sixty acres. He thought that was enough to start with until he could get better acquainted with the country. So he moved out ten miles from Tampa to what they call Selfner [sic.] now. There was no one within four miles of us except one negro family. They were called the Bob Golsons.

So father took Mr. John Robison, the family he had brought from Alabama with us, and hired five negroes to help us on the farm. The doctors told my father and mother they would be compelled to work out in the sun and air. So father got one of the men to hitch a horse to the plow and bring him up to the house. So that was the first time I had ever seen my father in common clothes and at the plow handles. So my mother had a light hoe and her and father went to their first work, which was for their health. So their health got better and they were getting along fine and making very fine crops. He had a very fine two horse team, two oxen, and a wagon in which our cotton and other produce was hauled to Tampa to sell. He got very good prices for his crops.

We farmed on until in 1872 we had a fine crop, but the houses on the farm was so old and rotten we could scarcely live in them; and I had to walk three miles to school with no houses between by father's house and the school. I was frightened most to death on the road, and when I saw a bunch of cattle or any wildcats it would scare me most to death. Father sent my sister to Tampa to board as there was better schools in Tampa. There was not much chance to buy books or anything else as the country was most uncivilized. Most all over Florida was the same way at that time I guess....There was a very dry spring and our house was most rotten. There was no lumber to build so father thought times would get better and probably a saw mill might be put up so he could build. But my mother had given one our negro men a hen that was sitting under the house. She told him he could have the hen and her biddies if he would watch and keep the wildcats and other varmints away from her chickens.

As it was very dry weather in May, it caused us a lot of trouble. The man took a torch of fat-wood and went under the house to see after his hen, and some sparks of fire caught in the dry rotten wood, and, as the wind was high, it caught fire. But we didn't know it for some time. Father got up about two o'clock in the morning and seen the house was on fire. He woke my mother, sister, and me. We were so frightened we could hardly live. The house had begun to fall in at the doors, so everything we had got burned except two featherbeds and a few other things. So we were left flat. Father never even had pants,

shirt, shoes or a hat. So a negro man, Bob Golson, seen the fire and came over to help, but we could do nothing as we had no water. We had to haul all the water we used one mile on a sled with a horse, so it was very bad for all of us.

So Bob Golson told father, “Mr. Barnwell, I is a negro but if you will wear some of my clothes, I will lend you such as you need.” For the yellow fever was raging in Tampa at that time, so poor father could not help himself. So he told Bob that he was almost a millionaire, and now almost a pauper. It most killed my dear parents that he had to wear the negro’s clothes until the quarantine was taken off of Tampa.

So we had a terrible time camping in old outhouses that was on the farm until father could do better. So when the quarantine was lifted off of Tampa father went in to see about getting some clothes and other things we all needed so badly. He wanted to see if he could get some of his Mason friends to help him ro lend him money to build another house. Mr. Crane and Mr. Wall was the men. They said to my father: “We are sorry to tell you, Mr. Barnwell, but that land is not yours. We didn’t know you was going to buy that place or we would have told you. But you was a stranger when you came to Tampa, and you bought the place before we knew anything about it.” So they told father that the place belonged to a widow woman, a Mrs. Post, and she was an invalid and had sold that place twice before to get money to raise her children on. And the place could not ever be sold because her husband, before his death, had deeded it to their great-grandchildren. So they said he had just as well leave the place for he could never get it.^{iv}

The Barnwells moved to Fort Odgen in Manatee County in December, 1872. Others began to trickle into Simmon’s Hammock, but it was not until Henry Plant completed the South Florida Railroad through the area in 1883 that area witnessed dramatic changes. The railroad spurred the growth of the region by having a Mr. Gordon plat the soon-to-be community of Seffner in the spring of 1884. Plant made Seffner the railroad headquarters on March 4, 1885, with all of his railroad employees residing in the village. Prior to platting only Frank Mathews and his family and J.E. Tomberlin and his family lived in what would become Seffner proper. Sometime between 1883 and 1885, Seffner was known as Lenna City, christened by Frederick P. Seffner, an Ohio immigrant, who named the community for his daughter Lenna. Mr. Seffner established a post office on September 26, 1884, and he was told that people would confuse the name Lenna City with that of Lemon City in Dade County. Therefore, Mr. Seffner named the post office, and consequently the community, after himself. Enough people moved to the area for community members to petition the county for a school. On September 18, 1885, Seffner was granted a school with J.E. Tomberlin, John Carney and John J. Evans serving as trustees. Miss Burts of Plant City served as the first school teacher, and in 1886 J.M. Branch donated an acre of land for the first school building to be erected.^v As residents celebrated their academic achievements, the Hillsborough County Real Estate Agency gave a glowing description of the community:

Situated twelve miles from Tampa, on the South Florida Railroad, is the new and thriving town of Seffner, a town destined to be one of the important points on that road, from the fact of its being the right distance

from Tampa and on accounts of its admirable location. A commodious depot building, erected by the railroad company, with the usual adjuncts of telegraph and express offices, proclaim it a 'regular' station, an advantage over temporary and flag stations at once seen. The town is alive to the advantages of educational facilities, and through the efforts of the inhabitants has secured the establishment of a public school, soon to be taught in a building belonging to the community. There are already a number stores, boarding houses, one newly finished hotel and two others in prospect to cost \$20,000, which will soon furnish all the accommodations the traveling public can wish. Although there are as yet no church buildings, services are held in a private hall, and we understand that a suitable house will soon be built to accommodate the church-goers. Two magnificent lakes—Hooker and Weeks—lying just east of the town, afford all the piscatorial sport one wants and give boating and bathing facilities. Around their margins can be found as fine grazing for stock as is to be had anywhere. Luxurious orange groves, here to be seen on every hand, give evidence of the superior quality of the land, which, by the way, is not to be spoken of simply as an orange growing country, but one will grow almost anything—in fact, everything that can be raised in semi-tropical Florida. Among other timber plentiful in this section may be mentioned oak, hickory and pine, and two saw-mills are daily converting the latter into building material. The Bowering Soap Manufacturing Company is also located here, with a capital of \$25,000, owned and controlled by parties from Toronto, Canada.^{vi}

Seffner had become a railroad boom town, one of the only unincorporated communities throughout Hillsborough County that could claim "town" status because of the number and type of businesses. In 1886 Seffner's population reached 75 with four stores, three steam saw mills, two hotels, and the soap factory. Josiah Yates operated a billiard and pool hall, Charles W. Spooner worked as a butcher, L.B. Cullen bred white Leghorn chickens, and John P. Hill sold real estate and notarized official documents out of his general merchandise shop. Bruce Stone was a man of many trades. He owned Stone's Hotel, served as Seffner's lawyer, and also sold real estate. Prospective residents could purchase unimproved property at \$10 an acre while improved land went for \$30 an acre. Like other communities throughout the region, citrus was an important crop with 24 people listed as growing anywhere from three to 15 acres of oranges.^{vii}

Between 1886 and 1887 many Tampa residents were struck with yellow fever, a deadly ailment in 19th century Florida. Seffner became a place of refuge for fearful Tampanns trying to escape. Like their constituents, members of Hillsborough County's Democratic convention fled to Seffner, holding their meeting in Charles Spencer's post office. Even T.C. Taliaferro, Tampa's banker, left the stricken town, setting up a branch office in Seffner.^{viii} John P. Wall, a Tampa resident and one of the state's most experienced yellow fever doctors, submitted the following description of Seffner to the Supervising Surgeon-General of the Marine-Hospital Service of the United States shortly after the epidemic had subsided:

Seffner is a railroad station on the South Florida Railroad, 12 miles from Tampa, and Mango is on the same road 2 miles nearer Tampa. Both last year and this there were a few cases of fever at Seffner in persons who had left Tampa in the incubation stage, but no spread of the disease followed. It was quite a refuge station last year and there was no restriction on intercourse between Seffner and Tampa at any time. It was, moreover, the change station for the railroad during last year, no trains coming nearer Tampa. This year all of a family of seven went out to Seffner and were sick except one, within a few days after removal. In the course of a month this family returned to Tampa, and the one who was not sick at Seffner was sick in Tampa, the remainder of the family escaping it in Tampa after their return. There are several stores, two boarding-houses, with a population of seventy-five or a hundred people at Seffner. The place is on elevated ground, with fair natural drainage into a large savannah some 300 yards to the east, yet as before stated, notwithstanding the fact that persons contracting the infection in Tampa were sick at Seffner there was no spread and not a single indigenous case in the place. Seffner is 12 miles this side of Plant City.^{ix}

The yellow fever crisis passed and Seffner continued to prosper. W.H. Beckwith established Seffner's first packing house in 1887, marking the beginning of Seffner's fruit packing industry. A year later, community members organized the Seffner Baptist Church of Christ and the Seffner Methodist Church, both in existence today. Enough people lived in the region for a Mr. Bennett to establish Seffner's newspaper the *South Florida News* in 1891, and reportedly, Seffner even had a cigar factory. Beyond oranges, farmers also grew corn, Irish potatoes, grapefruit, strawberries, and cabbage. The freezes of 1895 wiped out most of Seffner's orange trees, and it would be several years before the citrus industry rebounded. Because of the cold snaps, most of Seffner's businesses were forced to close their doors forever. Many newcomers to the area returned to the North after the freeze, and others moved to Tampa.^x

This citrus setback did not stop people from moving into the community for 672 people celebrated the new century in Seffner. By 1910, the population dipped to 549, caused by the redrawing of precinct boundaries in the 1910 census, but by 1930, Seffner's population nearly hit the 1000 mark with 931 residents. As Seffner grew so did its businesses. The impact of the 1895 freeze upon local commerce is readily witnessed by only two businesses, both of which were general stores, operated in Seffner in 1911. With the involvement of the United States in World War I, Tampa's ship building industry went into full swing. Consequently, many Seffner residents commuted by cars and bicycles to Tampa to work on the ships. In response, new Seffner businesses opened up by 1918. Seffner had a new weekly newspaper, the *Seffner Eagle*, a physician, a justice of the peace, two general stores, a lumber mill, a barber, a garage, a racket store, a real estate agent, and a notions and confectioner establishment. By 1925, the newspaper appears to have gone out of business, but two general stores still served the community as well as a grocery company, a bus line, three real estate agents, a barber, three notary

publics, a lumber company, a justice of the peace, a dairy, and a tourist camp. Seffner benefitted from the land boom with the platting of four subdivisions to the west, north and south of town, which added approximately 50 new families to the community.^{xi}

The prosperity would not last. According to Lee Longstroth, a long time resident in the Seffner/Mango area, everyone was impacted by the bust of the Florida land boom and the stock market crash that followed: “We all hit the bottom in a hurry -- none of us including thousands of others were no longer rich in lands or goods any longer...the banks failed and took little savings small folks had into oblivion and ours went along with that of others.”^{xii} Even churches teetered on the brink of financial ruin. To make ends meet, women would gather together and can fruit and vegetables and learn other ways to stretch a dollar. Area businesses also joined forces and organized the Seffner Board of Trade to try to improve the economic welfare of the region. Due to such efforts and to the agricultural livelihood of many of Seffner residents, they were able to survive the Great Depression.^{xiii} Things began to look up during the second half of the 1930s when Seffner was described as a:

a pleasant rural town once known as Lenna City....Today Seffner is a prosperous town and shipping point for the farming and citrus industries of the locality. The neighboring towns of Mango, Dover, Thonotosassa and Valrico are represented in the Seffner Board of Trade.

Numerous lakes near by, such as Lakes Hooker and Weeks, on the east, and Lake Locarno, on the south, are favorite fishing grounds. The show spot of Seffner is Spencer Park, located east of town. It is the assembly point of the Confederate Veterans in Hillsborough and adjacent counties during their reunion each year.^{xiv}

With the U.S. entry into World War II, nearly all of Seffner’s residents became involved in the war effort. By 1945, the town’s population grew to 1329, consisting of 1078 Whites and 251 Blacks. Agriculture still dominated the community including a rabbit ranch, a poultry hatchery, stock farms, citrus groves and plant nurseries. Other businesses also existed including two garages, several stores, a restaurant, a barbershop, an electric shop, a canning plant with 75 employees, and a tourist camp where political rallies were held. Seffner also had a regional airport. With such amenities and proximity to Tampa, Seffner continued to grow, and its agricultural dominance declined. By 1990 Seffner’s population reached 5371 residing in 2095 houses. Seffner had suburbanized.^{xv}

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ii. Bailey, “A Study of Hillsborough County’s History, Legend, and Folk Lore, with Implications for the Curriculum,” 259; Covington, *The Story of Southwestern Florida*, Volume I, 134,422-451; Department of the Interior, Bureau of Land Management, Eastern States, "General Land Office, Automated Records Project, Pre-1908 Homestead and Cash Entry Patents;" Leland Hawes, “Cattle Owner Hooker was a Civil,

Military Leader,” *Tampa Tribune* August 26, 1990, 4H; *Hillsborough County, Florida, 1850 Census*, 15; Spessard Stone, “Profile of Capt. John Parker,” *Sunland Tribune* 17(1)(November 1991), 21-23.

iii. Canter Brown, Jr., *African Americans on the Tampa Bay Frontier*. Tampa Bay History Center Reference Library Series No. 3 (Tampa, FL: Tampa Bay History Center, 1997), 42,58-60.

iv. Kate Barnwell Williams, “This is the Story of my Life,” *Tampa Bay History* 9(1)(1987), 52-54.

v. Ibid., 55-56; F.B. Akard, “Seffner History,” *Literary Florida* January, 1950, 35-37 (reprint of Charles H. Spencer, “Growth and Development of Seffner as Revealed by Tampa History Writer,” *Tampa Tribune* June 20, 1925); Bailey, “A Study of Hillsborough County’s History, Legend, and Folk Lore, with Implications for the Curriculum,” 265; Bradbury and Hallock, *A Chronology of Florida Post Offices*, 76; Deed Book S, page 236, Clerk of the Circuit Court of Hillsborough County; Leland Hawes, “Looking Back at Seffner,” *Tampa Tribune* September 29, 1984, 1D; Morris, *Florida Place Names*, 220; Robinson, *History of Hillsborough County, Florida*, 78; Mrs. Alva J. Rowell and Mrs. Annette Lee, “History of ‘Lenna City’ Now Seffner and First Baptist Church of Seffner,” (unpublished manuscript, on file Seffner file, Planning and Growth Management Department of Hillsborough County); *When History was in the Making*, 9.

vi. Hillsborough County Real Estate Agency, *Descriptive Pamphlet of Hillsborough County*, 33.

vii. *Florida State Gazetteer and Business Directory, 1886-1887*, 405-406.

viii. Akard, “Seffner History,” 36; Hawes, “Looking Back at Seffner,” 1D-2D; Robinson, *History of Hillsborough County, Florida*, 79.

ix. Wall, “The Yellow Fever in Tampa, Plant City, Manatee, and Palmetto,” 68-69.

x. Akard, “Seffner History,” 37; Hazel Coleman, “First Baptist Church of Seffner Founded in 1888,” *Brandon News* March 30, 1977; Covington, *The Story of Southwestern Florida*, Volume I, 199-200; Hawes, “Looking Back at Seffner,” 2D; Annie Jamie, “Seffner—Past & Present,” *Pony Express* April 7, 1970, 4; Lee Longstroth, “Recollections of the Seffner Presbyterian Church and Community History,” (Hillsborough County—Seffner clipping file, USF Special Collections), 4; Cynthia D. Merritt, “Church Celebrates 100 Years of Service, Change in Seffner,” *St. Petersburg Times* September 4, 1988, 1; “Seffner Methodist is 89 Years Old,” *Brandon News* March 30, 1977; “Seffner Items,” *Tampa Weekly Tribune* April 18, 1893, 2; “Seffner News,” *Tampa Weekly Tribune* July 13, 1893, 1; “East Seffner Items,” *Tampa Weekly Tribune* September 28, 1893, 6.

xi. Mrs. T.J. Beaty, “Seffner—From the Days of the Seminoles—Up to the Present,” *Plant City Courier* September 27, 1927, 6; *Florida State Gazetteer and Business Directory, 1911*, 404; *Florida State Gazetteer and Business Directory, 1918*, 540-541; *Florida State Gazetteer and Business Directory, 1925*, 889; Longstroth, “Recollections of the Seffner Presbyterian Church and Community History,” 2; Robinson, *History of Hillsborough County, Florida*, 79; U.S. Bureau of the Census, Census reports, Volume I, Twelfth Census of the United States, Taken in the Year 1900, Population, Part I, 93; U.S. Bureau of the Census, Thirteenth Census of the United States, Taken in the Year 1910, Abstract of the Census, 549; U.S. Bureau of the Census, Fifteenth Census of the United States, 1930, Population Bulletin, Second Series, Florida Composition and Characteristics of the Population, 51.

xii. Longstorth, “Recollections of the Seffner Presbyterian Church and Community History,” 6.

xiii. Ibid.; Margie Bradford, “At 79, She Reflects,” *Tampa Times* July 30, 1970, 10A; Hawes, “Looking Back at Seffner,” 2D.

xiv. Federal Writers' Project, *Seeing Tampa*, 132.

xv. "History of Seffner," *Pony Express* December 1, 1970, 1; *The Seventh Census of the State of Florida, 1945*, 31; The Planning Commission, *1990 Census Population and Housing by Place*, 2.