

# Eagle's Landing Lake



Eagle's Landing Lake in 2002 (USF)

*The following narrative is based on an interview conducted on August 28, 2002 with Harry Cunningham, III at his home on Eagle's Landing Lake, which lies between Bullfrog Creek and I-75. Harry is a lifelong Hillsborough County resident who grew up on Lake Carroll. However, Bullfrog Creek has been a part of his family history since the early 1960s. During the interview, Harry discussed the current conditions of the lake and creek, and shared his thoughts about the changes he has witnessed over the years.*

## Personal History



Aerial view of lake in 1996 (Cunningham)

Born in Ybor City and raised on Lake Carroll, Harry Cunningham, III has a family history in Hillsborough County that reaches back to the 1840s. His mother's side of the family is descended from John Jackson, the original surveyor of the City of Tampa. Jackson surveyed and mapped the city between 1847 and 1853.<sup>1</sup> It was Jackson who originally bought the family's property on Lake Carroll. Harry explained the purchase:

*"The original piece of land that he bought on Lake Carroll was 99 cents an acre if I remember right...He bought several thousand acres. Incidentally, Lake Carroll's original name was Horse Ponds because it was several ponds."*



Bullfrog Creek near Eagle's Landing Lake in 2002 (USF)

The first members of the family who actually built a home on Lake Carroll and moved there permanently were his maternal grandparents, the Cartys. Harry described their move to Lake Carroll:

*"My grandfather Carty was the first member...of the family to live permanently on the property. There was a 'springhouse' and they called it that because they went there in the spring. Grandpa Carty and Grandma, she was the Jackson...they moved out there [in the] early 1900s. First when they built the house, they went out on the weekends because it was a long trip from Tampa. So, then after some period of time when my mother was still fairly young, they moved out there permanently. My mother went to Holy Name, so I think she boarded at Holy Name or she stayed with my aunt, Kate Jackson, who lived in Hyde Park..."*

At Lake Carroll, Harry's parents, Harry, II and Catherine, had a tropical nursery called *Carroll Gardens*. His parents lived on Lake Carroll until a tornado hit the area in the 1960s. According to Harry, his parents became discouraged by this event and decided to move to Bullfrog Creek where they built a house. At the time that his parents moved, Harry left Lake Carroll when his Army reserve unit was activated for the Berlin Wall Crisis. When he returned from duty, he and his wife, Vonda, moved



View of lake from east in 2002 (USF)

to another part of Hillsborough County. However, Harry purchased property along with his parents on Bullfrog Creek. He and Vonda did not move out there, but would bring their children to play in the creek and visit their grandparents.

Harry and Vonda eventually moved to Apollo Beach, but did not build a home on Bullfrog Creek until a series of events led them back to the creek in the 1990s. Harry's parents remained living in their house on the creek, which is still standing today, until the late 1970s. Driven by frustration about the impending construction of I-75 near their property, as well as a desire to move to the mountains, Harry's parents sold their land and moved to the northern part of Georgia. At the same time, Harry sold his land on Bullfrog Creek.

During the construction of I-75, Eagles Landing Lake was constructed as a burrow pit. By the early 1990s, both Harry and Vonda felt that Apollo Beach was getting too crowded for them and wanted to find a place with a little pond. While driving along I-75, Harry saw a sign advertising property for sale near Bullfrog Creek. Although not his parents' original property, it was bordering the land that was once in his family. Harry said about finding the property:

*"It was never really our intention [to buy near the original property]. We were out looking for property to get away from Apollo Beach when I saw this sign...I think I was coming down the interstate when I saw the sign. I thought, 'Well dang, that can't be part of the original property.' At that time we knew the Von Boskerts had sold the property, the people who bought it from us. But I got to looking down there and I thought, 'Well, no. It must be 200 or 300 yards from there.' Then that Wednesday when I had drove down here and met John Lee [the real estate agent] I said, 'Well this is really something.' I don't know if that had any influence over us buying this. It may have. We basically bought it for the lake. But the fact that it was adjoining the other property was interesting."*

Harry and Vonda bought the property and built a home near the burrow pit, which Harry named Eagles Landing Lake after watching an eagle land at the lake. When Harry's parents visited the lake and remembered how nice the area was, the two decided to move back to the creek. Harry's parents spent the last years of their lives on Eagle's Landing Lake. Harry continues to enjoy the natural surroundings which allow him to "wander the woods at will" and adds to those surroundings by planting trees.



*Flooding on the Cunningham property in September 2001 (Cunningham)*



*Flooding in September 2001 (Cunningham)*

## History/Information

Eagles Landing Lake is a 9-acre lake located in the Bullfrog/Wolf Branch Creek Watershed, between I-75 and Bullfrog Creek. It is a man-made lake that resulted from a burrow pit dug during the construction of I-75 in the early 1980s. According to Harry, the lake's depth varies because of the method used to dig the lake. He shared:

*"The reason this side of the lake is deeper than the other side is because this is the dewatering side. And what they did, they dug this with pans. The pans, these are these big giant earth moving devices that dig the dirt like so, rather than the front-end loaders. So, they came here...entered the lake with the pans, made their circle, came back out here and of course disposed of the dirt along in here. And that's the method for digging the lake. When we first bought the property, I could take a depth finder and you could go and find the ridges in the direction the pans were operating. So, you could see the contour lines where the pans ran. Of course, they had to dig...they would keep this side a little lower to make sure all the water came over here."*

Eagle's Landing Lake and Harry's property are directly affected when Bullfrog Creek floods. Harry said about the flooding:

*"Three to four inches will bring it [the creek] to the tops of the banks. Five inches will bring it out of the banks. Anything more than that starts becoming a flood."*

He then explained what it's like when the creek floods and reaches Eagle's Landing Lake:

*"When that water comes this way, if you're standing down there, you would think that either an elephant stampede is coming through the woods or that some train has cut loose. It's just amazing to hear. And it's the groaning and creaking of the limbs and all the trash that it's bringing, breaking limbs and things that are caught in the trees. And you hear this roar coming down. I mean the roar is not like a wall of water, but you can stand there."*

With the ability to reference over forty years of experience in that particular area near Bullfrog Creek, Harry claims that such severe flooding did not occur prior to the construction of I-75. Although his parents had experienced flooding on Lake Carroll, when they built on Bullfrog Creek, the thought of a flood was not something that concerned them and they built their home near the creek's banks. When Harry's parents lived in their house on the creek during the 1960s and 1970s, it was never affected by flooding. However, according to Harry, since the mid-1990s the current occupants of that house have experienced three floods in which water went into the house. When Henry built his house on the lake he took into



*A tilapia caught in Eagle's Landing Lake  
(Cunningham)*

consideration what effect the flooding might have, and proceeded to build on a foundation of 5.5 feet.

The lake is impacted by its location between I-75 and the creek. Harry shared that when the creek floods, it brings various fish into Eagle's Landing Lake. He said:

*"But I can tell you that when this lake floods, you're talking about 8 or 9 feet of water that is over the top of what is now the lake. And so consequently, you get a sprinkling of whatever is growing in the creek."*

Some of the fish found in the lake include bass, tilapia, brim, minnow and shiners. Turtles and otters also make their home in Eagle's Landing, and alligators make an occasional appearance.

Since moving to Eagle's Landing Lake, Harry and Vonda have planted almost 1,000 native trees on their property. These include cypress, sand pines, long leaf yellow pines, cordwood pine, and oak. In the wooded areas surrounding the lake and creek, some of the animals that Harry spots include foxes, raccoons, and squirrels. There are also a diversity of birds that visit the lake, including eagles, ospreys, mocking birds, woodpeckers, hawks, cardinals, anhinga, spoonbills, brown pelicans, parrots, and occasionally sandhill cranes and ibis. However, Harry believes that the lake does not attract that many wading birds because of the irregularity of the lake's depth. Harry added that there are some animals and birds that he no longer spots in the area. These include deer, panthers, quail and turkey.

## **Development**

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The development of the area has played a significant role in the history of Eagle's Landing Lake, especially since the lake's formation is a direct result of the construction of I-75. During the interview, Harry shared a series of aerial photographs of the area, which showed the changes that have occurred over the years. When the Cunninghams first moved to the Bullfrog Creek area, much of the surrounding land was used for pasture. However, Harry pointed out that much of this pasture land was of poor quality, dry and sandy. The only visible trees in these historical aerial photos were near the creek. Some of the land in the area was also developed into fish farms and groves. There were also a few family homes in the area.

However, with the construction of I-75, many changes took place, especially in the road system. Bullfrog Creek Road was constructed so that the people with homes in the area could get to them. More recently, many lots on Bullfrog Creek Road have been sold. These new residents in the area, according to Harry, have not cut many of the trees down, and have helped to improve the natural environment. He said:

*"A lot of the neighbors down there have done a fine job of planting even in areas that were bare. Mostly other neighbors have seemed to trim only the bare minimum of limbs to get in and out of there and have enjoyed having the trees. So, to that extent I would say that there are more trees now and they're in better condition than they were when this was all scrub."*



*An aerial view of Eagle's Landing Lake and Bullfrog Creek taken in 1998. The line of trees surrounds Bullfrog Creek.  
(Cunningham)*



*A view of Eagle's Landing Lake from the southwest side in 2002 (USF)*

## The Future

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Since Eagle's Landing Lake is situated only on Harry's property, as long as he continues to own the property, the lake will be under his care and he can ensure that it is properly taken care of. Improving the area's natural state by planting trees near the lake and on the property has been a priority for Harry. In fact, he worked to have the lake declared wetlands. Therefore, even if he and Vonda decide to sell the property, the lake itself will be protected from development. However, with Bullfrog Creek, which has its headwaters near the Balm Wimauma Road and flows into Hillsborough Bay, the care and upkeep of the creek falls into the hands of many public agencies, as well as citizens, making it much more difficult to predict its future.

Harry's hope for the area is that it becomes a protected natural environment. He shared some of his hopes:

*"My future intentions would be to leave it just like it is. In fact, I see no reason... I wouldn't let anybody build down there [near the creek]... That piece will remain just like that... But it isn't that I don't want any people around me, I don't want the land to spoil what few animals can live here and make a living here. And of course we've reserved this as woods. Now, we own property on the other side of the creek... [it] will never be touched at all because, obviously, I'm not going to sell it and besides that, most of it would be in the wetland anyway. So it would be useless to anybody at all."*

### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> John Jackson Timeline. Tampa Bay History Center. <[www.tampabayhistorycenter.org/maps.htm](http://www.tampabayhistorycenter.org/maps.htm)>

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