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MAPPING OLD ST. JOSEPH, ITS RAILROADS, AND ENVIRONS

by ROBERT R. HURST, JR.

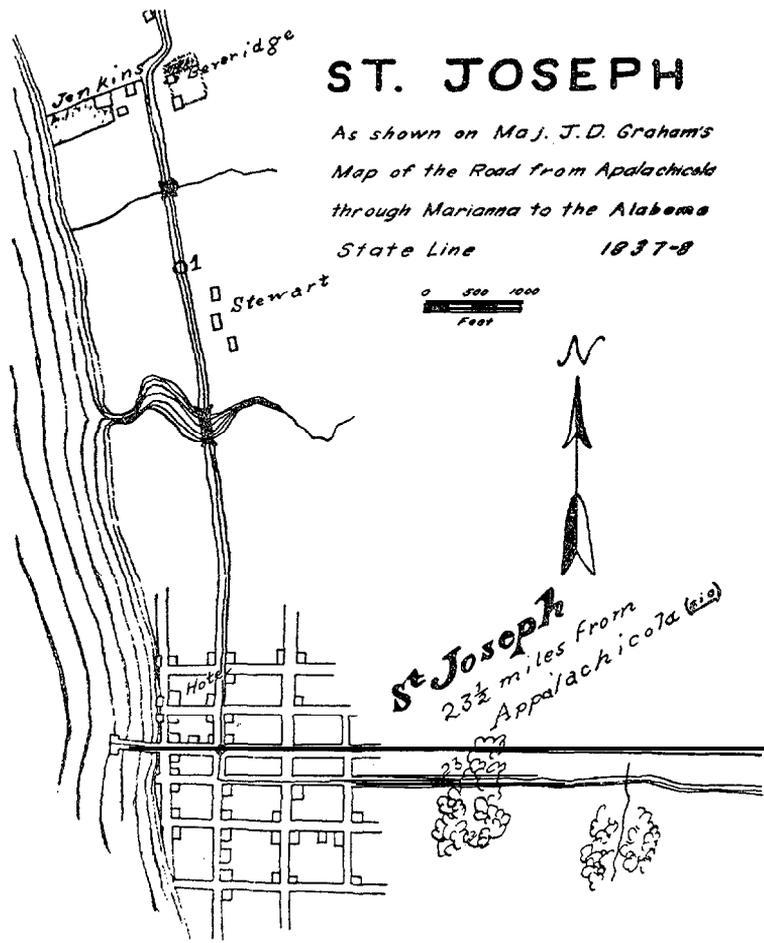
MANY PEOPLE have heard the story of the old city of St. Joseph, which existed between 1836 and 1844 in the area of the present city of Port St. Joe, on the Gulf of Mexico, a score of miles from the mouth of the Apalachicola River. The story of St. Joseph has been told in many places and in conflicting forms. Novels and scholarly articles have been written about the city and the story of the destruction by fever and flood of "the wickedest city in the South" has been told in many sermons. Much of this legend is false, belonging to folklore rather than history.

This paper and the maps drawn by its author are the result of a high school project in American history. The original aim was to draw a map of the old city and its two railroads, the first and third to operate in Florida, and among the earliest in the nation. The project has been expanded to include other parts of St. Joseph's environment, but the basic aim has remained unchanged.

A number of difficulties have been encountered in the preparation of this paper, but most have been overcome. The writer has had to evolve his own method of writing the text to accompany the maps, because the use of footnotes becomes cumbersome in explaining how the railroad bed was located, measured, and mapped. Two basic maps of the city have been found, but they do not agree at all when reduced to the same scale. It has been the objective of the writer to map the railroads and other features so clearly that future students could locate them easily, and to state the evidence that supports his maps so clearly and completely that a historian could judge the accuracy of the maps without further research.

The history of St. Joseph begins with John Forbes and Company, a land and trading company which had claimed land in the area, about 1,250,000 acres known as the Forbes Purchase, since the second Spanish Occupation. During Spanish occupation the Forbes Company (at that time called Panton, Leslie and Company) had title to the land. When Florida was taken by the

United States, settlers on the Forbes Purchase sued to nullify its claim so that they could purchase the land from the government at the rate of \$1.25 an acre. The American settlers had disregarded the Forbes Company's claims, moved into the area, and founded Apalachicola. It was at the mouth of the Apalachicola River and offered the most logical outlet for shipping cotton



from extensive areas in western Georgia and eastern Alabama. On March 17, 1835, the Supreme Court of the United States decided that the Forbes Company had legal title to the land.

The settlers of Apalachicola were not happy with this decision or with the prices asked by Forbes' Apalachicola Land Company. They began looking for another location to settle. They picked a place on St. Joseph Bay, which was to be the site of the town of St. Joseph.

The major problem of the settlers was the transportation of cotton. They planned to divert the trade of Apalachicola to their new town. At first they planned to build a canal from Lake Wimico, a bayou connected with the Apalachicola River, to their town. Their plans changed; they would build a railroad instead. The company was called "The Lake Wimico and St. Joseph Canal and Rail Road Company." Steamers could come from the Apalachicola River up the Jackson River ¹ then through the Jackson River to Lake Wimico and up Bayou Columbus ² to a point about eight miles by land from the new town. There the cotton could be unloaded from the river steamers, transported by the railroad to St. Joseph, and there reloaded on ocean schooners.

Contemporary newspapers suggest that the railroad was completed by March, 1836, and was formally opened with two locomotives in September, 1836. The railroad gauge was five feet. ³ The cotton trade was not as tremendous as the settlers had anticipated. Apparently most of the cotton continued to be shipped through Apalachicola. Steamers frequently ran aground in Lake Wimico, no matter how often it was dredged. By the end of September, 1836, the company was planning another route from St. Joseph to Tennessee Bluff on the Apalachicola River, ⁴ several miles northeast of the present city of Wewahitchka. This would place St. Joseph fifty miles nearer Columbus, Georgia (the cotton center of the area).

Preparations were made for the railroad to Tennessee Bluff, where the town of Iola arose as a terminal for the railroad. ⁵ The railroad was "The St. Joseph and Iola Rail Road." It was com-

1. Apparently it was not called the Jackson River at that time.
2. The author will attempt to show that what was then called Bayou Columbus is at present called Depot Creek.
3. The author, with five other high school students, raised a pair of railroad wheels on an axle from St. Joseph Bay in April, 1960, near the end of the old St. Joseph wharf. These establish the gauge, between flanges, as five feet.
4. Dorothy Dodd, "Railroad Projects in Territorial Florida," unpublished M.A. thesis, Florida State College for Women, May, 1929.
5. There is no evidence extant indicating that Iola existed as a community prior to the building of the railroad.

pleted in 1839.⁶ It appears that the Iola line did not get as much of the river trade as was hoped. Apalachicola received a greater amount of the trade.⁷

In 1841 the South was swept with an epidemic of yellow fever. The town of St. Joseph was seriously hit. As if that were not enough, the town was struck by at least one hurricane and possibly a bad fire,⁸ and with them went the railroads. The rails were later sold to the Monroe Rail Road in Georgia.⁹ Although it is clear from contemporary sources that the Iola line went into operation in 1839, its financial resources had been unequal to the task, and it was completed at the expense of the contractor, Benjamin Chaires of Tallahassee, who had received a mortgage on the line in return.¹⁰

St. Joseph actually ceased to exist because there was no strong reason for its existence. It was not "destroyed" except in legends that arose later. Today, all that remains as proof of the existence of the old railroad are a few banknotes and newspapers, a tattered autobiography in Georgia, a few stringers and crossties, some bits of old railroad bed, a pair of old locomotive wheels, and legends. A fire burned the Calhoun County courthouse at Abe Springs, apparently destroying the old deed records.¹¹

After obtaining an approximate idea of where the railroads ran by looking at contemporary maps, the writer was able to investigate the general area of the railroads and to use aerial photographs of the area. The following pages describe the old railroad routes as seen in modern times.

6. Dodd, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 24.

8. A placard in the museum in the state park at Port St. Joe states this. The writer has been unable to verify this information. Conflicting dates given for the hurricane suggest that more than one hurricane struck the old city. This agrees with contemporary meteorological thought (1960) that hurricanes tend to occur in series along the same paths.

9. R. J. Moses, "Autobiography," ca. 1890, unpublished manuscript in private possession.

10. *Ibid.* But see Dodd, *op. cit.*, 22-23.

11. See Dr. Dodd's thesis and G. M. West, "Old St. Joe" (Panama City: 1922) for good early accounts of the history of St. Joseph. The most comprehensive history yet published is "St. Joseph, An Episode of the Economic and Political History of Florida," by J. O. Knauss in the *Constitutional Convention Number of the Florida Historical Quarterly*, October, 1938.

The Lake Wimico and St. Joseph Rail Road.

As we know, both St. Joseph railroads terminated at the wharf in St. Joseph. Today a community called Oak Grove stands where St. Joseph stood. It is about one mile south of Port St. Joe. The railroad, according to O. H. Throop's map,¹² ran out on a gigantic wharf, eighteen hundred feet in length and sixty feet in width. The railroad bed is not presently visible all the way to the shore. Probably the best explanation for this is that with the wash of the tides, the development of modern highways, and the building of homes in the area, the bed has gradually faded away. It is clear that the railroad came to the bay in this area, however. It is shown on Throop's map as running onto the wharf in the northern part of section 13, range 11 West, township 8 South.¹³ Recent aerial photographs of Oak Grove, which show the railroad bed as a dark line, and an exploration of the ground confirm this location.

There has been some speculation that the two blocks of St. Joseph which were nearest the bay are now underwater. Evidence to support this is that bricks, pottery, china, glass bottles, and other remains have been found under the water. However, this writer does not believe the shoreline of today and that of the time of St. Joseph differs that much. By comparing the original U. S. Land Survey Map, 1833, by Benjamin and F. B. Clements, with modern geological survey maps, the author has reached the conclusion that the shore has not moved to any degree. It could have moved as much as sixty feet, but no more than that.

Nine hundred and sixty-nine feet back from shore, the railroad bed becomes visible. It ran due east, down a present alley between Highway 384 and Iola Street. As late as 1959 it could be seen on the east end of Iola Street, just to the north, where it ran across a patch of low swampy ground. At that point the roadbed was 20 feet wide and 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ feet high.

12. This map, in tatters, was located about 1956 by Dr. Dodd of the Florida State Library. It was admirably reconstructed by Mr. A. G. Wright of the Florida State Museum. It seems to have been intended for real estate promotion, and was not an accurate map of the city as constructed. Its representation of the Lake Wimico railroad seems to be very accurate.

13. The reconstruction of the map in the museum at Constitution Park, Port St. Joe, shows it to be in section 12. But the more exact reconstruction at the Florida State Museum and the original at the Florida State Library both show it to be in section 13.

The roadbed ran from the bay in an approximate due east direction. Parts of the bed still exist and its outline may be seen on aerial photographs. At about 4,450 feet east of the shore, the bed curved slightly into an 86° direction. At about 5,950 feet east of the shore, the bed is obscured, for the Old Niles Tramroad was built atop it from this point to White City on Searcy Creek. At present, Highway 384 runs over the Old Niles Tramroad from its westerly beginning at Highway 98 to its intersection with the Apalachicola Northern Railroad.¹⁴ About 770 feet before reaching the Apalachicola Northern Railroad, the Lake Wimico and St. Joseph railroad left the highway to curve in a 145.5° direction. The St. Joseph and Iola railroad continued along the Old Niles Tramroad which curved in a direction of 26° .¹⁵

Thus, at approximately $1\frac{3}{8}$ miles east of the coast of St. Joseph Bay the bed forked, with one branch going toward Depot Creek and the other going to Iola on the Apalachicola River. The curve that the Lake Wimico route took is visible on aerial photographs, connecting Highway 384 with the Apalachicola Northern roadbed by a geometric curve. It may also be distinguished upon visiting the area. Other evidence is shown on the maps of Graham and Throop and on a map, author unknown, entitled "Apalachicola and Its Environs," located in the Florida State Library at Tallahassee.

At the end of this curve, the Lake Wimico roadbed straightened out to run at an angle of 145° for about $1\frac{3}{8}$ miles. The Apalachicola Northern Railroad was built atop the Lake Wimico bed from the curve for several miles. It continued on the old roadbed around its next curve and for $\frac{3}{4}$ mile farther at an angle of 105° . At this point the Apalachicola Northern left the Lake Wimico roadbed to run south of Depot Creek.¹⁶ The

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14. This information was provided by Mr. Fred Maddox. Mr. Maddox was born about 1890 at Gautier Hammock and grew up in the old St. Joseph area before it became repopulated. The writer has had a great deal of contact with Mr. Maddox. Mr. Maddox distinguishes carefully between what he knows, what he guesses, and what he has heard. The writer has relied heavily on Mr. Maddox, and found his information to be accurate always.
15. Information provided by Fred Maddox and by Mr. Joe Hunter, We-wahitchka, Florida.
16. Maddox, *op. cit.*, Dodd, *op. cit.*, p. 19, says only that the Apalachicola Northern Railroad Company built part of their railroad atop the old Lake Wimico roadbed.

old railroad bed may be seen from the spot where the Apalachicola Northern leaves it for 745 feet further, still at an angle of 105° . Then a modern firelane obscures it. The firelane seems to have been built atop the railroad bed and runs at 105° for $2\frac{7}{9}$ miles, and then leaves the railroad bed. At the point of departure of the firelane from the old roadbed, the roadbed reappeared but soon forked into two parallel branches. The northern branch ran for 404 feet before tapering out, and the southern branch for 217 feet. This brought the railroad to the edge of Depot Creek. The total length of the Lake Wimico and St. Joseph Railroad was 7.75 miles from shore to shore.

The Depot

The Depot was the apparent name of the railroad terminal on Depot Creek. A contemporary newspaper gave it that name, as does the map, "Apalachicola and Its Environs." However, O. H. Throop showed quite a large town called Greenville at the Depot on Depot Creek. He showed streets running in north-south and east-west directions. These streets probably never existed in fact, for the site is relatively undisturbed and there is no physical evidence there of streets. Where Throop's streets are shown there is only low, swampy land. There is no physical evidence of the existence of even a depot building. About 80 feet from the shore of the creek there is a brick structure, about six by four feet and less than one foot high, which Mr Maddox believes to be the remains of a relatively recent distillery for illegal whisky.

The creek itself, at the depot, averages seven feet in depth. River steamers probably did not have trouble with navigation once they were in the creek. On early maps Depot Creek is called Bayou Columbus. It seems the name was changed to Depot Creek because of the depot located on it, but the name Bayou Columbus was not lost. A small creek east of Depot Creek is now called Columbus Bayou.

The pilings of the wharves that were used in loading and unloading freight still remain. There appear to have been two wharves, both parallel to the shore. The west wharf pilings measured 217 feet in length, and the east wharf pilings measured 177 feet in length. Contemporary newspapers stated that storehouses were completed at the depot. No physical evidence remains. The

railroad appears to have been forked for the purpose of connecting it with each of the wharves. A curve in the northern fork paralleled the eastern wharf, and was only 86 feet from it.

An elevated "walkway," about four feet wide and 18 inches high, paralleled the eastern wharf between the wharf and the roadbed. It appears to have had some sort of wooden foundation covered with tar. Due to lack of time, equipment, and labor, the writer did not attempt to excavate this "walkway." Using the few physical remains and Throop's map, the writer has mapped the Greenville Depot as its contemporaries probably intended it to be in the near future.

The St. Joseph and Iola Rail Road.

In building the Iola railroad, the original railroad was used as far as the curve east of St. Joseph. At this point a new curve turned the new road to run at 26°. The Old Niles Tramroad was built upon the new roadbed at least as far as White City on Searcy Creek. At White City Highway 71 curves onto the St. Joseph and Iola roadbed and was built on it as far as Honeyville, at the city limits of Wewahitchka.¹⁷ At 7.4 miles from White City, the roadbed curved to run at 345°. ¹⁸ It continued in this direction for 6.6 miles and then curved again to run at 5.5°. About 1/2 mile further, Highway 71 curves off the Iola Railroad bed, which continued in a 5.5° direction past Lake Coma and across Taylor Branch. ¹⁹

In the Taylor Branch swamp, the writer found what may have been several of the original railroad stringers. Just north of the branch, the railroad bed was elevated by a fill six feet high. A little farther northward, the land is higher and the bed was cut into the ground. The bed is visible in all of the Taylor Branch area and it may also be seen on aerial photographs and an 1852 survey map.

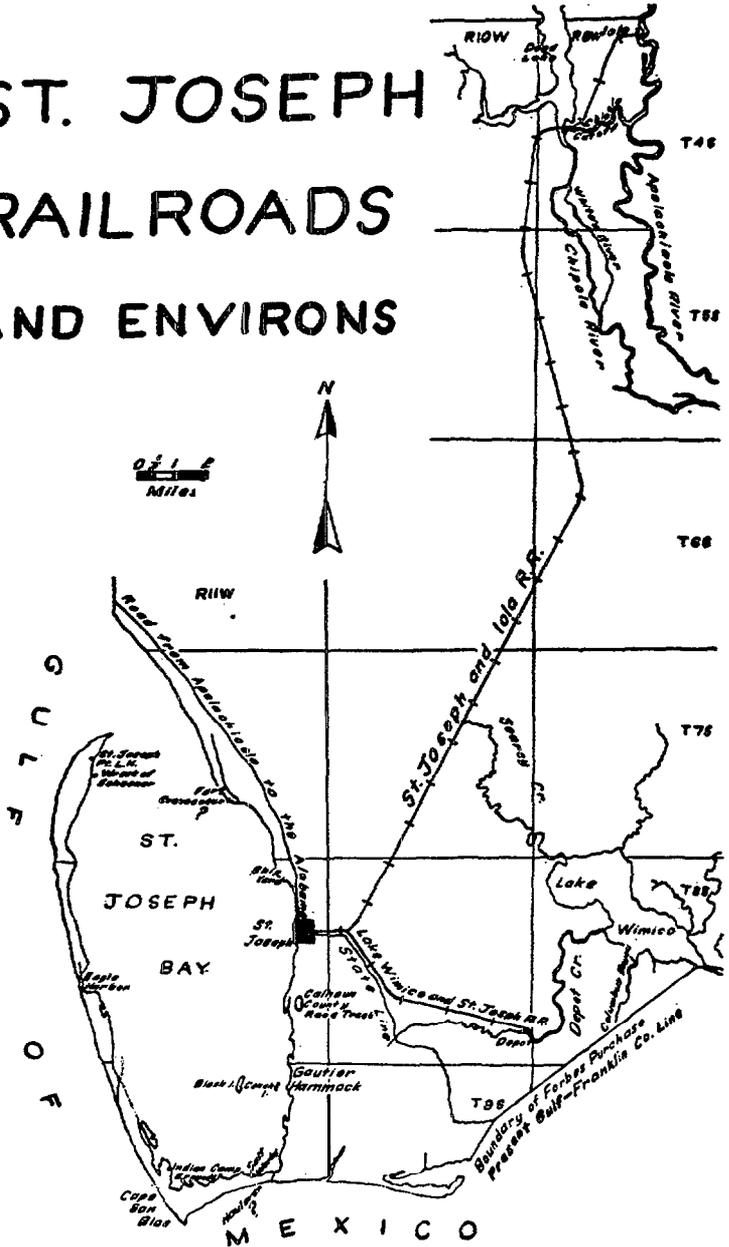
At 1.8 miles along the bed from Highway 71's departure from it, Highway 22 runs onto the bed. The highway follows the bed around its curve to the Dead Lake. The old railroad

17. Statements by Mrs. Maddox and Mr. Hunter.

18. This curve, in T. 6S., R. 9W., is clearly shown on the original U. S. Land Survey, made in 1852 by Wells.

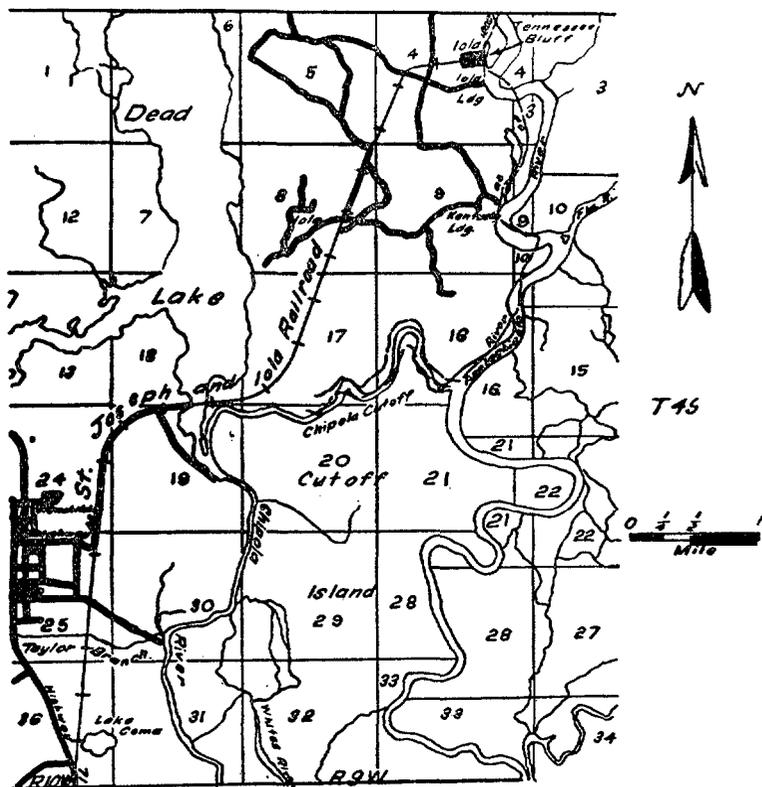
19. After Highway 71 leaves the roadbed, the roadbed becomes clearly visible both on the ground and in aerial photographs most of the way through Wewahitchka.

ST. JOSEPH RAILROADS AND ENVIRONS



bridge across Dead Lake has long since fallen down, but pilings were visible until the recent building of a road and dam across the lake. After crossing Dead Lake the railroad made a wide curve,

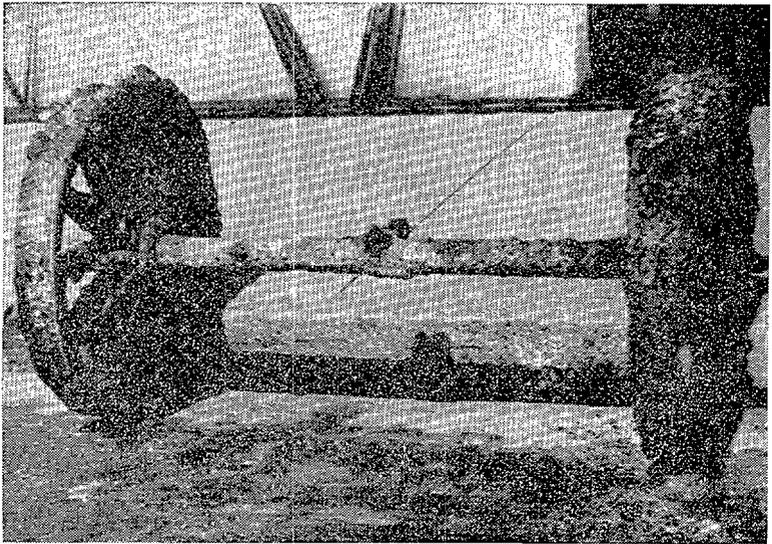
NORTHERN TERMINUS OF THE ST. JOSEPH AND IOLA RAILROAD



visible on aerial photographs, and straightened into a 20° direction. The roadbed gradually fades on aerial photographs, as it goes northward and the writer had to go into the area and locate the roadbed on the ground. This was the most difficult task in

the entire project.²⁰ The original U. S. land survey of T. 4 S., R. 9 W., shows curves in sections 17 and 4 which seem illogical. The curve shown in section 17 was not found to exist on the ground. The curve shown in section 4 did exist, but was not as large a curve as the old survey showed.

The most surprising discovery was the location of the old railroad terminal at Iola, for the terminal was not on a Tennessee Bluff overlooking the Apalachicola River, but was on a Tennessee Bluff overlooking a pond! Since it is stated in many places that at the time the railroad was in operation Iola was on the river, the river must have changed, leaving the Iola site decaying in the swamps. The area is thickly littered with brick and the railroad bed may be seen quite well. At 440 feet west of Tennessee Bluff, the bed branched into three beds, each going to the river bank. To one side of the place where the roadbed branched is a deep hole which is said to have housed a machine used to operate a railroad turntable.



20. Four trips were made by the writer into the muddy and mosquito-ridden Iola peninsula, and he and his friends were dogged by misfortune. On the first trip, a car slid off a muddy road and an eight mile walk to the nearest house followed. On later trips jeeps were taken, but they also got stuck - fortunately, not all at the same time, so that there was always one to pull the other out.

Recently the writer and some friends succeeded in digging a pair of railroad wheels from the sands under St. Joseph Bay in the approximate area of the end of the old wharf. The wheels were still on their axle. They were taken to shops of the Apalachicola Northern Railroad to be cleaned and prepared for the museum at Constitution Park. Railroad men in Port St. Joe are convinced that the wheels are from the forward truck of one of the old railroads locomotives. The wheels are 36 inches in diameter; their gauge between flanges is five feet.

At the time the wheels were found, it was discovered that numerous bricks and huge, square pilings from the old wharf still remain, hidden by the sands. At present it can be said that the wharf was almost certainly as long as Throop shows it and that it was very wide, but there is some evidence that it did not run at the angle shown by either Throop or Graham. Further excavations will be needed to prove this. There seems no reason why the pilings cannot be mapped and the wharf defined, but it will require a great deal of work.