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TRABUE, ALIAS PUNTA GORDA

by VERNON E. PEEPLES

THE FLORIDA SOUTHERN RAILWAY in 1885-1886, constructed a line from Bartow Junction to Charlotte Harbor, and a new town, Punta Gorda, sprang up at the southern terminus of what was then the southernmost railroad in the United States. Punta Gorda's beginning enbroiled its settlers and leading citizens in a controversy that raged for many years.

Early in 1883, Isaac H. Trabue, a middle-aged attorney from Louisville, Kentucky, purchased from a homesteader a thirty-acre tract of land on the south side of Charlotte Harbor. Later that year, Trabue leased the land to his cousin, John Trabue, who planned to operate "a fruit place, truck garden, cattle ranch, place for shipping cattle, [and a] packing house or hotel."¹ Early in 1884, John Trabue moved to South Florida to take care of the fruit trees then growing on Isaac's land and to begin a fruit nursery. Meanwhile, Isaac was purchasing more land adjoining his original tract, and he was dreaming of the grandiose profits that he hoped to realize from his Florida investments.

Isaac had purchased his land, sight unseen, through John Cross, a real estate agent living at Liverpool, Florida. Feeling a certain obligation to Cross, he promised to give him one acre of land, and, in the fall of 1884, he wrote to his cousin John at Charlotte Harbor: "I think I had better sell a few lots so as to make a start, I want Cross to have his acre-as I promised. I will write to him to go down immediately and that you will lay it off for him Then he can sell three or four lots for me and give the place a start."² In this letter to John, Isaac described how he wanted the land laid out. He had decided that the entire waterfront would be a park, and the streets, rather than running north and south, would wind with the bay. The streets were to be named

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1. Articles of Lease between Isaac Trabue and John Trabue, November 6, 1883, Exhibit No. 12, Isaac Trabue vs Kelly B. Harvey, a suit in chancery, unnumbered and not on Chancery Progress Docket, Clerk of the Circuit Court, DeSoto County, Arcadia, Florida. This case hereinafter cited as *Court Case*.
 2. *Court Case*, Exhibit No. 13, Isaac Trabue to John Trabue, September 29, 1884.

for members of his family. "Now as for naming the place or town," he wrote, "if we want to bring the place into notice—we must give it a name that will give it notoriety [*sic*]. I know of no name that will advertise it more than ours—will therefore name it Trabue."³

John proceeded to carry out his cousin's wishes. He employed a young surveyor, Kelly B. Harvey, who, during November and December 1884, surveyed the town site. Harvey's sketch was sent to Kentucky for Isaac's approval, and the latter, after voicing criticism of minor points, accepted the layout. He also urged John to begin selling lots. On February 24, 1885, Harvey recorded the plat at Pine Level, the county seat, and his bill for surveying services, \$136.55, was sent promptly to Isaac. Then suddenly, two days later, Harvey wrote to Isaac, threatening to sue if he was "not paid by return mail." He also pointed out in his communication: "If you haven't the money at hand there are plenty of money lenders in Louisville."⁴ Isaac was incensed over Harvey's preemptory demands, and to make matters worse, his finances were so low at the moment that he lacked the money to pay the survey bill. He referred Harvey to John Trabue, explaining that "he did the trading with you, and he must pay you. You and he can certainly sell enough lots to pay for laying out, if you can't you ought to have been more moderate in laying them out."⁵ In another letter, Isaac informed Harvey, "You would play the duce [*sic*] having a law suit against one who never employed you. So you had better take my advice and help John [Trabue] and [John] Cross make a sale."⁶

John Trabue was in a quandary. He thought that as Isaac's agent he had been carrying out instructions; now he wondered why his relative seemed to be opposing him. In an effort to placate Harvey and to forestall any action on his part, John ordered fifty copies of Harvey's map of Trabue. The price was \$2.00 per map, and the bill was to be paid in land. When the maps were completed, they were to be delivered to John Cross at Liverpool, who was to prepare a deed to be sent to Kentucky for Isaac's signature.⁷ When this deal was negotiated, the advertised price of Trabue lots was \$100, but by the time Harvey delivered the maps the price had dropped to \$50.00, and there were no purchasers. So Harvey, not waiting for Cross, prepared a deed for four \$50.00

3. *Ibid.*

4. *Ibid.*, Exhibit No. 14, Harvey to Isaac Trabue.

5. *Ibid.*, Exhibit No. 23, March 5, 1885.

6. *Ibid.*, Exhibit No. 25, March 8, 1885.

7. *Ibid.*, deposition of John Trabue, April 4, 1890.

lots himself, signed Cross' name to the accompanying letter, and mailed everything to Isaac, who signed and returned it.

Cross sold a couple of homesites at Trabue and from the proceeds paid Harvey's surveying bill. He was, however, unhappy with Harvey's having signed his name to the letter going to Isaac. Harvey claimed that there was nothing wrong with what he had done; he had worked in Cross' Liverpool real estate office and had signed his name many times. The matter likely would have been dropped at that point, but for the events that followed. Cross, in addition to having Isaac Trabue as his client, also represented several large land companies and the Florida Southern Railway Company. He had acted as right-of-way agent for the railroad when it was constructing its line into Charlotte Harbor. On September 1, 1885, Cross wrote to Isaac Trabue from the railway's headquarters in Boston: "I am doing my best for 'Trabue' . . . you will get no R. Road there-as you want [*sic*] give them no [*sic*] inducements to run in. . . ." ⁸

Six days after this letter was written, Isaac arrived in Boston to confer with Florida Southern officials, and a deal was made that would bring the railroad through his holdings at Trabue. Writing to John from Boston, Isaac noted, "I have been on a talking race They say they have big offers to go to Hickory Bluff, and if I don't deal liberally with them they will go to Hickory Bluff or Pine Island. . . ." ⁹ Isaac had agreed to give Florida Southern one-half of his land holdings at Trabue.

With the railroad coming into Trabue, homesites would no longer be a drag on the market; there was every reason to believe that a land boom on the shores of Charlotte Harbor was imminent. When Isaac returned to Louisville, he asked Harvey in a letter to "return me the deed and I will send the money." ¹⁰ He wanted the four lots that Harvey had received in payment for the fifty maps. But Harvey refused Isaac's request, and in a letter dated October 14, 1885, he reminded Isaac that, "at the time of the map trade nobody placed any value on the lots and most people ridiculed the idea of laying out a town there." ¹¹

Isaac was unhappy with Harvey, but a new development made him furious with John Cross. When Cross wrote Trabue from

8. *Ibid.*, Exhibit No. 18, September 1, 1885.

9. *Ibid.*, Exhibit No. 10, Isaac Trabue to John Trabue, September 6, 1885.

10. *Ibid.*, Exhibit No. 32, Isaac Trabue to Harvey, September 12, 1885.

11. *Ibid.*, Exhibit No. 34, Harvey to Isaac Trabue, October 14, 1885.

Boston he had identified himself as an agent of the Florida Southern, and it was he who told Trabue that if he wanted the railroad he would have to deed half his property to the company. Now, as Trabue's agent, he wanted a commission on the deal. But Isaac threatened to sue Cross, insisting, "I will not pay him a cent commission—he can't pack water on both shoulders."¹²

While Harvey still refused to return the lots to Isaac, Cross did not press his claim for his agent's fee. Harvey's land at Trabue consisted of one half-block located across from the projected waterfront parks, and Florida Southern wanted the location for a hotel. John Chandler, company president, came to Trabue, and according to Harvey, threatened him with legal action, claiming that the land in dispute was included in the trade with Isaac Trabue. The railroad claimed Harvey had fraudulently obtained title to it and Trabue could not deed it to the company.

In the fall of 1886, both Harvey and Isaac Trabue moved to Trabue, the railroad completed construction of the new line, another site was selected for the hotel, and the feud quieted down. Then in the fall of 1887, controversy began all over again. There was an indication of trouble in October when the *Punta Gorda Beacon* predicted that the name of "Trabue will be changed to Punta Gorda."¹³ On October 28, a notice appeared announcing a meeting for the purpose of taking whatever steps were necessary to incorporate the town.

Harvey had been calling the town Punta Gorda ever since March, and as it turned out, he was also the moving force behind the incorporation move. Thirty-four men, including Harvey, journeyed to Pine Level to sign the notice of intent to incorporate.¹⁴ The journey was made at night so that Isaac Trabue would not find out about it. The meeting was set for 7:30 p.m. in Tom Hector's billiard hall on the second floor above a drug store. The roll was called, and of the thirty-four qualified voters present, a two-thirds majority favored incorporation. The men then proceeded to select by ballot a seal, the corporate name Punta Gorda,

12. *Ibid.*, Exhibit No. 7, Isaac Trabue to John Trabue, October 5, 1885.

13. *Fort Myers Press* quoting the *Punta Gorda Beacon*, October 13, 1887.

14. Most of these men were laborers who were stranded in Trabue after the completion of the Punta Gorda Hotel. Isaac Trabue divided them into two classes: property owners were first class, the others were second class. Four of the men were Negroes.

and a council.¹⁵ Isaac Trabue, who had learned of the meeting anyway, was present even though he could not vote. He tried in vain to dissuade the group from a relinquishing the name Trabue. He later reported: "I intended to give the squares called Parks to the town of Trabue as long as it retained that name, but when, if ever, the name was changed to some other name than Trabue, then the Parks were to revert to me. . . . I attended the meeting and told them about the trust deed and showed it to those who would look at it. K. B. Harvey was mad with me and we have not been on good terms ever since. . . . If they dispise [*sic*] my name then they should scorn my bounty."¹⁶

Later Harvey explained that the name Punta Gorda was "chosen almost unanimously because it was the original historical and geographical Spanish name. The name of the large hotel built by the Florida Commercial Company was the Punta Gorda Hotel. The newspaper was called the Punta Gorda Beacon. Mail came addressed to Punta Gorda citizens. . . ."¹⁷

Isaac, on the other hand, believed that, "The people of the town got mad with me and to vent their spleen they would change the name of the town and post office."¹⁸ He claimed that Harvey, as one of the tellers at the meeting, had counted the votes and was the one who had announced that the name Punta Gorda had won. On another occasion Trabue wrote: "In order to give a job to a newspaperman who lived at Charlotte Harbor and [who] had no interest in the prosperity of this place Trabue, alias Punta Gorda -but who was blatant and loud in bellowing like one of Dean Swift's bulls for the incorporation of the town, they procured a copy of the private ordinances of some town, passed them, and ordered them published at great expense in Mr. Newspaperman's potent backer paper. . . . The said council ordered the shooting of all blackbirds caught inside the town limits. Suppose [*sic*] they desired no competition in Birds of passages."¹⁹

15. Albert W. Gilchrist, later governor (1909-1913) of Florida was the unsuccessful candidate for mayor. At first, he had opposed changing the name of the town, but finally voted for the change.

16. *Court Case*, deposition of Isaac Trabue, October 12, 1895. This deposition was taken for Isaac's action to regain title to the waterfront parks in Punta Gorda.

17. *Ibid.*, deposition of Harvey, October 12, 1895. This deposition was taken to aid Punta Gorda in retaining title to its waterfront parks. The name Punta Gorda was probably given to the area by Spanish fishermen who frequented Charlotte Harbor in the 1840s. The earliest found map showing Punta Gorda was published in 1852.

18. *Court Case*, deposition of Isaac Trabue, October 12, 1895.

19. *Florida Commercial Company vs W. W. Bateman*, tax collector of Punta Gorda, April 4, 1889.

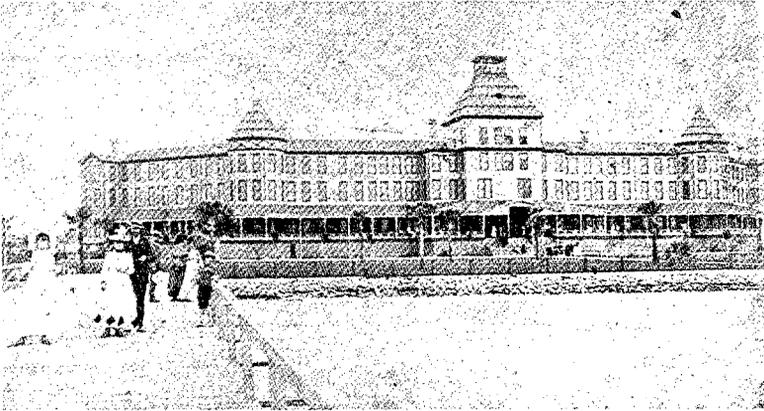
Law suits quickly filled the court docket. Isaac sought to quiet title on the bayfront parks, and ten years later the case was disposed of in favor of Punta Gorda. Isaac also sued Harvey to regain title to the lots deeded in payment for the fifty maps, but after a five year court fight, he lost the case. Isaac, the Florida Commercial Company, and the Florida Southern Railway all sued to have the town of Punta Gorda dissolved because of irregularities in the incorporation election and because the town council levied a ten-mill tax on real estate. On final appeal to the Florida Supreme Court, Punta Gorda won the case. In all the litigation, Trabue acted as his own attorney, but frequently his language was more colorful than persuasive.

In the meantime, it was realized that Isaac's home was located on the waterfront in, of all places, Harvey Park. The mayor then ordered the city marshal to arrest Trabue for obstructing a public park. After a trial before the mayor, Trabue was convicted and was fined \$10.00. The circuit court eventually reversed this decision, but Isaac was determined to secure revenge against the community. His opportunity came in 1888, after the election of Benjamin Harrison, a Republican, to the presidency. Trabue was also a Republican,²⁰ one of the few living then in that part of Florida. When he was asked to recommend someone to be appointed postmaster of Punta Gorda, he suggested Robert Meacham, a Negro who had played an important political role in Florida during the Reconstruction era.²¹ Meacham, now a minister in Punta Gorda, received the appointment, and according to a contemporary newspaper report, "Isaac Trabue and a couple of Negroes went on

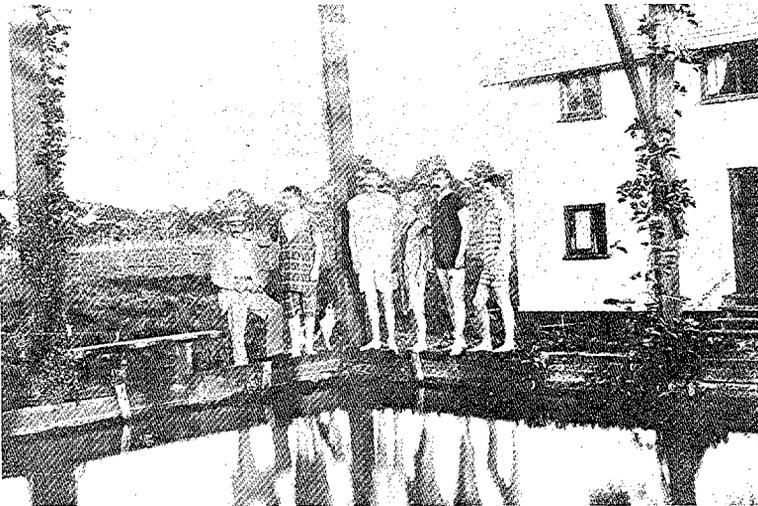
20. In Kentucky, Trabue had been both a Greenback and a Republican. He had been the nominee of the Greenback Party for presidential elector, state treasurer, and state attorney general. He was also the Republican nominee for Congress in the Louisville district. He never won an election.

21. Meacham had served as temporary chairman of the Florida Constitutional Convention of 1868, and he was one of the three Florida electors of 1868 that voted for Grant and Colfax. Details on Meacham's political activities during the Reconstruction era are in William Watson Davis' *Civil War and Reconstruction in Florida* (New York, 1913), 493 fn, 495, 500-01, 541, 666, 695. See also facsimile edition with an introduction by Fletcher M. Green (Gainesville, 1964). See Tallahassee *Floridian*, January 21, 1868, and John Wallace, *Carpet-Bag Rule in Florida* (Jacksonville, 1888), 50, 132, 167, 176-78, 180, 207-09, 299-301, 369-70, 435. See the facsimile edition with an introduction by Allan Nevins (Gainesville, 1964). 1964).

Peoples: Trabue, Alias Punta Gorda



Hotel Punta Gorda in 1888. Modernized and renamed Hotel Charlotte Harbor by Barron Collier in 1925. Burned in 1959.



Punta Gorda scene, 1893. Left to right: unidentified, Frank Q. Brown, the president of the Florida Southern, State Senator Frank Cooper, Isaac Trabue, General Albert W. Gilchrist, S. F. J. Trabue.



Isaac H. Trabue during the Civil War.



First city council of Punta Gorda, 1887.

First city council of Punta Gorda, 1887.

Left to right: Thomas H. Hector, clerk; J. O. Swisher; John Stanfield, marshal; W. H. Simmons, mayor; K. B. Harvey; Neil Dahl; James L. Sandlin.

Meacham's bond." This paper also claimed that, "the recommendation and appointment of a Negro to the office at Punta Gorda is a studied insult to the people of that town."²² Another newspaper called Trabue "a cronic [*sic*] kicker" and insisted that he was "a serious drawback to the growth and prosperity of the town of Punta Gorda."²³

Trabue tried to defend himself against these charges in a letter published in the *Fort Myers Press*: "Some flies who want to be called editors have dragged my name before the public with meddling imprudence. They say that I will not sell my lots and that I thereby impede the progress of the country, also that I went \$10,000 bond for a negro [*sic*] and for that I am to be sent to Hades dead or alive. I pity the furniture in their upper stories, I want the public to know the truth. I had some land on the South bank of Charlotte Harbor that was not worth the taxes. I gave half of it to a railroad to come to it. I then gave them choice of halves on condition that they would build a \$100,000 hotel on it. They took the East half, put a railroad through it, and erected the hotel. Then the would be's tried to change the name of my place assisted by the Democratic office holders for an insult to me. Will an honest and fairminded public say I have done wrong and ought to be kicked out of the country and taxed to confiscation because I took an old croaker's advice and gave away 250 lots-more than half of what I had and behold the result! Shame on the editor of a paper who will allow to be published in his sheet the sentiment that, 'No Republican should be allowed to hold an office in DeSoto County if he was elected, as long as there was a Democrat around who would have it.' What ought to be done with such action? I leave it to the public to judge."²⁴

In 1907, Isaac, old and sick, returned with his wife to Kentucky and there he died. His estate was valued at more than \$500,000. Trabue had left a legacy of good works in the considerable amount of property that he had given to stimulate Punta Gorda's early development. Today he is hardly known or remembered by the citizens of the community, and there is no lasting monument that bears his name or tells his story.²⁵

22. Jacksonville *Florida Times-Union*, June 6, 1890.

23. *Fort Myers Press* quoting the *Arcadia Arcadian*, August 1, 1890.

24. *Ibid.*, December 4, 1890.

25. A one-block long street in Punta Gorda was named Trabue by Albert W. Gilchrist when he resubdivided a block.

In editing the article "Billy Bowlegs (Holata Micco) in the Civil War (Part II)," by Kenneth W. Porter, which appeared in the April 1967 (Volume XLV, Number 4) issue of the *Florida Historical Quarterly*, changes were inadvertently made in paragraph 2, page 395, which distorted the meaning of Professor Porter's historical analysis. The *Quarterly* deeply regrets this error. The following is the way the paragraph should correctly read:

"The Union Indians beat the Confederates off with heavy loss and then withdrew, still fighting, across the Red Fork of the Cimarron and, under cover of darkness, across the Arkansas. The Unionists then took up a strong position at the horseshoe bend of Bird Creek, known as Chusto Talasah (Little High Shoals), northeast of Tulseys Town. The Confederates did not catch up with them for nearly three weeks. Then, on the morning of December 9, the loyal Seminoles opened an action in which, after four hours of hard fighting, the Unionists forced the Confederate Indians to fall back to Fort Gibson. The Union Indians then slipped away and took up another strong position on Shoal Creek (Chustenahla), a tributary of the Verdigris.