

Brief History

By about 12,000 years ago Paleoindians following big game such as the Mastodon, reached the Florida peninsula. As glaciers melted and sea levels began to rise these hunters and gathers created more permanent homes in Florida. Their populations reached an estimated 250,000 by the time the first European explorers landed on our coastlines. The first historic descriptions of our earliest residents called their tribes the Tocobago, Timucua, and Caloosa. As early as 1527 a Spanish map depicted the *Rio de la Paz* or Peace River. Members of the Panfilio de Narvaez and Hernando de Soto campaigns may have set foot in the vicinity in 1528 and 1539. A Spanish official in 1657 noted dwindling native populations due to sickness and disease. Later pioneers observed wild orange trees in the area, evidence of the early trade between Native Americans and the first settlers at Saint Augustine. As the native population was reduced to almost nothing the void was slowly filled with newcomers from the Georgia area, Creek Indians.

In pursuit of runaway Creek Indians, known as Seminole, the U.S. Military began to cut roads and build forts crisscrossing the Florida peninsula. In 1842 the Armed Occupation Act offered incentive for pioneers to move further south into Florida. It prohibited settlement near the Peace River however, considered home to the Seminole people. But gradually cattlemen began to push their herds east from the Tampa Bay region towards the open ranges of today's Polk County. An 1848 hurricane in Hillsborough County is credited as one reason settlers moved inland. By 1849 the Brown and Raulerson families had located near the area of Lake Hancock and others soon followed. James D. Green and his wife Elizabeth Whidden became the first white settlers in the area later known as Bartow. A third Seminole War (1855 – 1858) resulted in the construction of Fort Blount at what is now downtown Bartow. With increased immigration came small farms, orange groves, one-room schools and churches. Area residents soon looked toward a more secure future, and Polk County was formed from Hillsborough and Brevard Counties. Florida Governor Perry signed the legislation February 8, 1861 after Florida had seceded from the Union. It is believed pioneer Reading Blount suggested the name to honor former President James Knox Polk. Cattleman Jacob Summerlin donated 120 acres, the site of Fort Blount, to create a county seat, and the first county courthouse was constructed in 1867. Bartow was named for Confederate Colonel Francis Bartow killed at the Battle of Bull Run in 1862.

With immense financial resources Henry B. Plant brought the South Florida Railroad from Sanford, Florida, crossing Polk County, and reaching Tampa Bay by 1884. People could now travel quickly from Jacksonville to the Florida west coast. New towns rapidly developed across Central Florida. The value of land boomed in Polk County and the prosperity led to the construction of a new courthouse in 1884. The first commercial shipment of Phosphate rock for fertilizer left the area in 1888 marking the birth of new industry. With the coming of the turn of a new century came new technology and the arrival of the horseless carriage. In 1909, six-thousand residents celebrated the opening of the third county courthouse at Bartow, featuring an automobile parade, one of the first buildings fully wired for electric lighting in the city. The county population soared to over 37,000 by 1910. The towns and villages of the early pioneers no longer were dotted with log shacks, but beautiful homes and paved roads. To prevent this early history from being forever lost the old courthouse open as the Polk County Historical Museum in 1998.

