

# DOWNTOWN PANAMA CITY



HISTORIC TOUR



How did Panama City get its name? What Downtown sites are on the National Register? What famous event put Panama City in national judicial history? What structure is only one of 5 left in Florida? What structure is recognized nationally for art deco architecture? Find out the answers and much more on the Downtown Panama City Historic Walking Tour.

You may begin at any tour location. Download the free audio tour to hear the fascinating stories of the people and places that make Historic Downtown Panama City a Florida treasure.



## 1 **Bank of Panama City**

*100 Harrison Avenue*

Located in what was once called “Banker’s Corner”, this was the hub of the town in 1917. Built in the years 1910 and 1911, this building was the first bank in the Downtown and the first brick building in the county. The brick was made locally at the South Prong Brick Company, on Wetappo Creek, owned by Joseph Dyer and John Kronmiller. There originally was a second story with seven offices reached by a stairway on the Beach Drive side. G. M. West, considered the founder of Panama City, was the president of the bank and the Gulf Coast Development Company, which was housed in the front of the upstairs. The bank’s lobby had a mosaic tile floor and the fixtures were of Georgian marble. In the rear of the bank was a small store. In 1915 the bank closed. Later occupants were the Sudduth Realty Company, the Bay Shore Bar and La Royale Lounge and Package Store. Notice that the second floor is missing. In 1988, a fire destroyed the building. The first floor was rebuilt in 1988 in the same style with the original brick.



## 2 **First National Bank**

*101 Harrison Avenue*

This white enamel brick and terra cotta building was the second bank to open and was across the street from the Bank of Panama City. It was erected in 1915, and with its famous clock (added in 1926), became a landmark in the Downtown. With the failure of the bank in February, 1931, Commercial Bank took over the building and the clock. In 1957, Commercial moved up Harrison and with it went the clock, where it resides today. WJDM TV station, later WJHG, occupied the building for a while. Black Insurance Agency occupied the building from 1973 to 2002. Afterwards, the offices of Harrison, Rivard & Duncan occupied the building.



### 3 Bay County Historical Society Museum

133 Harrison Avenue

This building was first occupied in 1931 by the Van Kleeck Co., a hardware, sporting goods and building supply store, and The Ideal Millinery (owner Mrs. Laura I. Biggs), a ladies' ready-to-wear store. Two years later, owner Roy Van Kleeck, expanded into both sections. It was then occupied by Surplus Sales Service from 1960 to 2002, and is perhaps the longest continuously operating hardware store in the county. The balconies, railings, skylights, pine flooring and masonry walls are all characteristic of commercial masonry vernacular buildings of the time. In fact, it is the best (one could almost say the only), unaltered interiors of the 1930's commercial period in Bay County.



The entrance is flanked by irregular wooden stages on both sides, whose outline retraces the shape of the large show windows that used to border an exterior walkway with a recessed doorway. The shelving along one side wall is pine, was originally lacquered, but is now painted maroon. Old timers recall an office on the rear balcony from which personnel could oversee the daily happenings on the ground level.

One of the most famous murders in Bay County took place in the rear of this building. In 1939 a disgruntled employee, fired by Van Kleeck, took the life of his former employer. When Van Kleeck was discovered missing, a posse was formed, and his body and abandoned car were soon found. The murderer was found in Jacksonville and returned here for trial. He was found guilty, but was not given the death penalty. On the night of April Fools, 1939, a group of masked men entered the jail, tied up the jailer, and took the accused killer to an isolated area and executed him. This group of vigilantes has never been identified to this day.

In 2017, the Historical Society of Bay County occupied the building with a museum depicting early county life. Displays include the fishing, boating and railroad industry. Always on display is an authentic buggy, used by a rural doctor, with a backdrop of the J. W. Zelm mural of Florida pines. Also on display are early photographs, postcards, tools and Native American artifacts. At present, the museum is open on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. Admission is free.

## McKenzie Park

*Corner of Oak Avenue & Park Avenue*

This is where it all began. This was the focal point for the first development of Panama City in 1887. Even the original name, Park Resort, tells us that the developers intended the park to play an important role in their “resort”. In 1889, the town was renamed Harrison, no doubt for the current President Benjamin Harrison.

The Panama Canal was under construction at the time and hopes were high that our town would become a primary link to that endeavor. In the early 1900’s, developer George Mortimer West suggested renaming the town Panama City aiming to ride the wave of prosperity and encourage real estate development in Bay County. The railroad was established at the same time with investment money from Asa Candler, founder of the Coca Cola Co. Until that time, the community was nothing more than another little seaside village, along with others along the bay, such as St. Andrews, Millville, Parker, Cromanton, Farmdale, Allanton and Wetappo. Before that, there was no easy land route to get to the bay. The railroad was the catalyst that propelled Panama City into the major tourist, fishing, shopping, commercial and administrative center of the county.

The park originally seems to have no official name. It was just referred to as “The Park” or “City Park”. Later, it took on an official designation of “Magnolia Park”. This is the oldest developed parcel that virtually remains as it was when it was established in 1887 by the first developers G. W. Jenks and C. J. Demorest. It is the oldest park in the county. In the early 1900’s, the premises had a perimeter fence, a historical cannon at the entrance and a gazebo in the center. The McKenzie Fountain was erected in 1914. The park was the place for annual celebrations of the Pioneer Picnic and Independence Day. Perhaps one of the largest attended and famous gatherings was Natal Day on July 1, 1913, which marked the creation of Bay County. It was renamed McKenzie Park in 1964 after the first mayor. Revitalization took place in 1986 under the direction of the Downtown Improvement Board. Concerts and other events keep the community spirit of the park alive to this day.



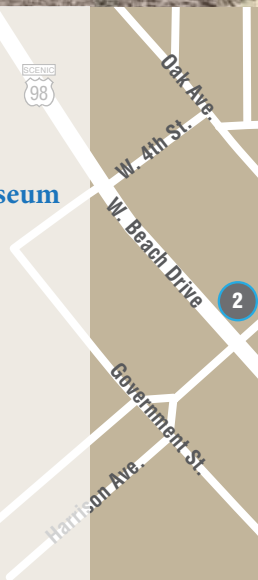
## 5 McKenzie Home

17 East 3rd Street

This home was completed in 1909 for owner Belle Booth, Post Mistress. In 1912, Belle married Robert L. McKenzie, the town's first mayor. This two-story clapboard frame dwelling is one of four homes in Bay County on the National Register of Historic Places. It is the second oldest home in the Downtown. Please note the State Historical Marker out front, which tells in more detail the life of R. L. McKenzie. The building was purchased by the City and restored in 1997 by the Junior Service League, who maintains the home's interior.



- 1 Bank of Panama City
- 2 First National Bank
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- 4 McKenzie Park
- 5 McKenzie Home
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- 10 Magnolia Heights
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- 12 Judge Sapp Home
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- 14 The Massalina Bayou Bridge



## 6 Sherman Arcade

228 Harrison Avenue

This old Mission Revival style building was built in 1934 by W. C. Sherman, a lumber tycoon, and one of Panama City's major promoters in the 1920's and 1930's. In 1998, it was listed on the National Register of Historic Places and is the only arcade building in Panama City. It was designed by William Young and built at a cost of \$20,000.

Its features are unusual for the time, since arcades went out of style in Florida after the 1920's. It has a central walkway with a two-story atrium and full-length skylight. The skylight was an important feature in the days of uncertain electrical service and low wattage light bulbs. The building originally had offices upstairs and retail shops such as Powell & Co. and Every Woman's Store on the ground floor. Most of the upstairs offices were occupied by lawyers. Such well known ones are P. S. Roll, C. S. Isler, W. Fred Turner, A. M. Douglas, Joe & Charles Mathis and Mercer P. Spear. Now, businesses occupy the first floor and apartments are available on the second floor.



## 7 Commercial Bank

*227 Harrison Avenue*

This structure is located in the “Four Points” area that one hundred years ago, from this point northward, was almost totally residential dwellings, with the exception of the fire department on the corner where the old city hall, now Center for the Arts, is located. Originally, this buff-colored brick and Indiana limestone building was the Commercial Bank. Built in 1926, it is one of only two examples of Georgian/Colonial Revival-Commercial architecture in the Downtown.



## 8 Martin Theater

*409 Harrison Avenue*

Known as the Ritz, this was the most popular cinema through the 1960's. Hollywood actress Constance Bennet and actor Clark Gable attended events here. It was built in 1936 in Art Deco architecture. It is recognized as the premier example of art deco architecture, and was the cover piece on *Tickets to Paradise*, a celebration of art deco theaters in the United States. In 1976 it closed and was a shooting gallery for a while, but was renovated and reopened in 1990 by the Downtown Improvement Board. It is both a live performing arts center and host to frequent public events.







## 9 Old City Hall (Center of the Arts)

*19 East 4th Street*

Completed in 1926, this building was the home of city government, including the police headquarters with the jail and fire department on the side until 1959. The building is considered significant because of its Mediterranean Revival architecture and its unique stuccoed surface with flecks of ground colored glass. It now houses the Center for the Arts, offering art shows, exhibits, classes and music, film and private events.

## 10 Magnolia Heights

This was the highest elevation in the Downtown. Old time historic figure Hawk Massalina claimed that in the late 1800's, a hurricane flooded the whole Downtown, with the exception of this area. Hawk did have a tendency to embellish his stories and he had many.

He was the son of Jose Massalina, the founder of Red Fish Point, a historic all African-American community located directly across the bay from Panama City. Given the name Narsisco Massalina at birth he was nicknamed Hawk as a young boy for his uncanny ability to spot fish. He later served as a guide for both the Union and Confederate forces during the Civil War. To honor Hawk and his family, the name of Harmon Bayou was changed to Massalina.

Years later in 1888, C. B. Slade tried to develop a new community in this area called Floriopolis, but nothing seems to have come of it.



## 11 Bay County Courthouse

*300 East 4th Street*

The Bay County Courthouse was originally built in 1914 and 1915 by contractors Dobson & Oliver of Montgomery, Alabama. It is one of only five original courthouses still in use in Florida. After suffering significant damage from a fire in 1920, the structure was rebuilt in 1921. The Courthouse is the largest example of Classical Revival architecture in Panama City. At the time of construction, it was one of only two monumental structures in Panama City. The other was the Panama City High School. The most important national event that occurred in Bay County was the famous *Gideon v. Wainwright* case held here. The final 1963 Supreme Court decision entitles an indigent criminal defendant to free, court-appointed defense counsel. A State Historical Marker at this site commemorates this event.

When the Courthouse was completed in 1915, there wasn't much north of here except dwellings and the Conger and Starling Turpentine Distillery on McKenzie Avenue. The distillery was later in 1939 replaced by the Ensley Hotel, and still survives today as only one of two of the hotels of the early 20th Century.

## 12 Judge Sapp Home

*224 East 3rd Street*

Located in the area named "Magnolia Heights" that is situated on the highest elevation in the Downtown, the home was built in 1916 with scaffolding from the nearby courthouse for J. Mercer Sapp one of the earliest attorneys in the city. The prairie-bungalow style home was the first to have an elevator, two bathrooms and hot water. The front porch was a gathering place for citizens, politicians and attorneys to discuss the social and political happenings of the times. This is one of four homes in Bay County on the National Register of Historic Places. This home is occupied by the first woman mayor of Panama City.

## 13 **Massalina Bayou**

*234 East Beach Drive*

Massalina Bayou, located on the town's eastern boundary, was Panama City's only bayou in the late 1800s and 1900s. It is sometimes referred to as "the bayou" in the early editions of the Panama City Pilot newspaper. The earliest reference to its name can be found on an 1886 nautical chart where it is incorrectly called "Massaliner's Bayou."

It is often mistaken that the bayou was named after a famous historical figure in the area, Hawk Massalina. In truth, the bayou was named for his father Jose (Joe) Massalina. Jose was a Spanish merchant mariner in the 1800s. He jumped shipped and settled along the eastern shore of bayou and was a boat-builder.

Life on the bayou used to look very different from what it looks like today. The bayou consisted of high bluffs and large oaks and magnolias lining its shores. Known as a commercial district of the area, you could find a number of marine-related businesses, one restaurant, two groceries, a fish and produce market, a lumber yard and a carpentry shop at the mouth of the bayou. While the majority of the buildings are no longer standing, there are a few interesting structures still in existence. According to some, the first resident on the bayou was William A. Farley. His home, built right after the Civil War, is the oldest surviving structure in Bay County. Known as the Gateway to the Cove, it sits on the corner of East Beach Drive and Cherry Street. Another prominent structure is Bayou Joe's, an old-Florida style restaurant on stilts. It was once known as Ethridge Marina, a small marina where mules were used to pull the boats into the bayou. Legend has it that you can still see the ghost of a fisherman in a yellow nor'wester slicker suit walking the docks.

## 14 **The Massalina Bayou Bridge**

*Tarpon Dock / East Beach Drive*

There are four sites where bridges have spanned the waters of Massalina Bayou. First, in an effort to connect the town with the neighboring town of Millville located to the east, a simple "crossing of Massalina Bayou" was put in place in 1908. In 1913, a 300-foot-long and 17-foot-wide wooden bridge replaced the 1908 structure.

In 1910, property owners called for a First Street (Beach Drive) bridge to reach across the bayou into the Cove. It was replaced by a 35-foot-wide concrete bridge in 1928. Known as "lift bridges," the whole midsection of these bridges were lifted. The present Frank Nelson Sr. Bridge was constructed in 1951. It is said to be the last remaining drawbridge in Northwest Florida. Locals frequently refer to it as the Tarpon Dock Bridge.



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