

FROM TIME TO TIME



Englewood's Green Street Church Museum

PHOTOS BY RHONDA MANDEL



Placida's Margaret Albritton Gallery

ENGLEWOOD AND PLACIDA REMEMBER THE PAST

ART GALLERIES, ANTIQUES STORES, AND OTHER SHOPS LINE THE MAIN STREET OF OLDE ENGLEWOOD VILLAGE.

There, shoppers can find everything from nineteenth-century furniture and kitschy, 1950s home decor to contemporary sculptures and trendy pajamas. This eclectic mix of past and present seems appropriate for this stretch of Southwest Florida, where historic buildings, remnants of Native American inhabitants, and wildlife breeding grounds dot the modern landscape.

A drive down the Gulf Coast from Englewood to Placida provides a sense of the region's earlier days via sites like Olde Englewood Village, a revitalized area that once served as Englewood's main commercial hub. Architectural guidelines, carefully planned streetscaping, and other community efforts have helped to ensure that as the village marches toward the future it also retains its

Old Florida charm. "Englewood is very unique; it's like a step back in time," says Chris Davis, coordinator of the Englewood Community Redevelopment Area Program. "It's a very quaint Florida town."

During the late 1800s, Englewood's main drag, Dearborn Street, was nothing but a dirt path, beat by the town's first non-Native American settlers, the Goff family. They traveled the trail by foot and, later, oxen- and horse-drawn carriages from their sixty-acre property along Lemon Bay (purchased for the whopping sum of \$90).

Originally developed around the turn of the twentieth century as a lemon-grove town, Englewood later lured residents and visitors for its excellent hunting and fishing. The Quimby family built a two-story, wood-

WHILE EMBRACING THE FUTURE —by Beth Luberecki

framed dwelling at the western end of Dearborn Street, where they operated a boarding house. The circa-1896 structure, Englewood's oldest remaining house on the mainland, now serves as the Community Redevelopment Area Program's office.

Nearby, Peter Buchan ran a general store and post office in a two-story building on the shore of Lemon Bay, the approximately fifteen-mile-long estuary that separates Englewood from Manasota Key and Englewood Beach. He also built a 250-foot dock, the arrival point for supplies coming into the town. (At the time, no roads connected Englewood, which straddles modern-day Sarasota and Charlotte counties, to other area towns.) Though the original dock no longer stands, the building remains in the Buchan family.

Other businesses followed Buchan's lead, and Dearborn Street served as the site of many other "firsts," including the first doctor's

office, tavern, and newspaper. When the Tamiami Trail (U.S. 41) was originally mapped out in the 1920s, it ran through the town along Dearborn, a boon to local merchants. But later revisions to the route took the road directly from Venice to North Port, bypassing Englewood altogether. By the middle of the twentieth century, Dearborn Street's glory days had ended.

RETAIL RENAISSANCE

In the 1990s, civic and government leaders banded together to revitalize the area, and today's Olde Englewood Village is the result of those efforts. Though still a work in progress, the village has attracted a slew of new businesses to Dearborn Street, creating a vibrant shopping and dining zone that hosts frequent festivals and other events. "There's not a lot of crossover," says John Radkins, co-owner of Grass Roots Gallery, of the mer-



Along Olde Englewood Village's Dearborn Street, find home furnishings sources, art galleries, a longtime hardware store, Tim Miller's glass-blowing studio (right), and an old-fashioned ice cream parlor, where Linda Oakland of Sarasota (left) enjoys a treat.



PHOTOS BY RHONDA MANDEL



chants that line the street. "Each store is unique and is trying to have a product mix that is unlike the others."

Radkins's four-year-old gallery boasts a modern feel, offering everything from \$15 ceramic tea cups to oil paintings priced upwards of \$3,000. Many of the works are by local artists. "We call it Florida art from a different point of view," says Radkins. "We felt there was a need for a true big-city-style gallery in this area because there are so many artists."

Several other galleries occupy retail spaces in the village. Lemon Tree Gallery displays jewelry, watercolors, painted furniture, photographs, and other works by Florida artists in a cheery, yellow storefront and a cottage around the back that features a whimsical, paint-splattered floor. Artist Tim Miller operates The Glass Station in, appropriately enough, a former gas station. Some days, visitors can watch as Miller's colorful glass works take shape where cars were once serviced.

Antiques stores also call Dearborn Street home, such as Blue Pineapple, where recent finds included a circa-1900 Irish pine chest of drawers and a nineteenth-century French walnut vitrine and leather-topped bureau. Wish

You Were Here stocks items with a more recent pedigree, offering a selection of vintage 1940s and '50s home decor sprinkled with new accessories. Think rattan chairs, Hawaiian-print pillows, shell mirrors, and other tropical-flavored pieces perfect for outfitting a beach house.

"When I saw the rebirth of Dearborn Street happening, I wanted to be a part of that," says Cathy Garrison, owner of Wish You Were Here. "I just felt like we all needed something to be connected to."

Dining options along the historic strip include a Mexican restaurant, a European-style bistro, and The Cafe on Dearborn, which doles out dishes with "Florida style, New England flavor." American Pie Ice Cream recalls an old-fashioned ice cream parlor, complete with a black and white checkerboard floor.

"There's an unbelievable community feeling here, and a core of people who are into preserving Englewood but also very much into making it a real, viable, fun-to-come-to kind of place," says Gene McCall, president of the Olde Englewood Village Association and owner of Gene McCall Conservation and Restoration

Inc., an antiques restoration business. Not surprisingly, retaining a sense of Englewood's past ranks high on McCall's priority list.

"When you lose it, you don't get it back," he says. "We live in such a fragmented society. I love my computer as much as the next guy, but if you don't know the past you can't navigate into the future very well."

Of course, there's more to Englewood's history than its commercial days of yore. One block south of Dearborn Street sits the Green Street Church Museum, overseen by the Lemon Bay Historical Society. Surrounded by a white picket fence, the trim, white structure was built by the Englewood Methodist Church in the late 1920s. No longer used for regular services, the church now contains models of the town's historic buildings, a collection of sharks' teeth and fossils, and a 1930s-era quilt made by the Whiteaker family. Collages of historic photos depict everything from Englewood's original settlers to fishermen proudly showing off their catches.

NATURAL RESOURCES

There are plenty of ways to heed the call of the wild in these parts. A few blocks south of the Green Street Church Museum, Indian Mound Park abuts Lemon Bay, featuring a boat ramp, picnic areas, and a slightly overgrown trail that traverses a Native American shell midden thought to have been abandoned around 1350.

Just to the north of Olde Englewood Village, Lemon Bay Park and Environmental Center occupies more than two hundred bay-side acres covered by pine and scrubby flatwoods to the north and mangroves to the south. A variety of animals resides here, from bobcats and armadillos to tree frogs and gray foxes. Swallowtail, buckeye, and other butterfly species flutter around the butterfly garden planted with native Florida flora. About 120 kinds of birds have been spotted, including bald eagles, which nest in the park's slash and long-leaf pines.

According to Kathi Rader-Gibson, park naturalist, it's a good place for "observing what's around us. Sometimes we forget to do that. Being able to come out and see a bald eagle nest with a youngster in it—it's not something that most people get an opportunity to see."

Along Route 775, which heads south from Englewood toward Placida, further opportunities exist for exploring the area's history and natural beauty. One of Charlotte County's last



From left: The visitors' center and a nature trail at Cedar Point Environmental Park; Lemon Bay Park's rose garden; the Margaret Albritton Gallery and Fishery Restaurant in Placida



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remaining portions of undeveloped land on Lemon Bay, Cedar Point Environmental Park encompasses more than one hundred wooded acres crossed by seven marked trails. Hikers can spot gopher tortoises, bobcats, owls, and other wildlife; some trails are closed from October through May to protect the bald eagles that nest in the park. A visitors' center, open Monday through Friday, offers films, nature displays, lectures, and other information.

Farther south on Route 775 (aka Placida Road), luxury housing developments have started popping up on this stretch populated with marinas, seafood restaurants, and other businesses with ties to the area's fishing heritage. Anglers have been flocking here for years, and companies like Grande Tours offer guided expeditions that take folks to good spots for landing trout, snook, snapper, and other fish.

At the end of Placida Road lies the Fishery Restaurant, situated in a fishing village-like environment on Gasparilla Sound. The

Albritton family owns this longtime dining spot that focuses on simply prepared, fresh seafood. Specialties include Cajun-spiced shrimp and flounder baked with blue crab stuffing and topped with hollandaise sauce. "We try not to get too carried away with anything," says Garry Albritton. "We just use the best products we can find."

Some of those products probably come from the fish market located next to the restaurant, which the Albrittons operated before leasing it to a local fishing family last year. "The restaurant and gallery keep us busy," says Albritton, referring to the Margaret Albritton Gallery, run by his wife, Margaret. It occupies a building that once housed Albritton's great-grandfather's IGA store and post office. Today, shades of coral, lime green, and turquoise decorate the exterior, along with a couple of giant, tropical fish painted on one wall.

Inside, the gallery stocks the owner's hand-colored etchings as well as candles, shell-print

dish towels, beach cover-ups, and other crafts and gift items. The artsy vibe even extends to the shop's floor, which has been painted green and stamped with palm trees and leaves. "Every year Margaret paints the floor and coats it with something else," says Albritton. "Every time she can she does something a little different with it."

There are a few other shops on site as well as a small museum, which displays a collection of Albritton-family rocks, shells, and coin banks as well as photos of the Placida area.

"It's kind of a hit-or-miss thing," says Albritton of the museum's operating hours. If the museum is closed, he's been known to open it up for people interested in taking a peek and learning more about the region.

"Placida is like a little respite," says Albritton. "It's a little bit of Old Florida that's hard to find anymore, especially in this area." 🐦

Beth Luberecki is a freelance writer and the editorial director of Times of the Islands.

WANT TO GO?

GETTING THERE: To get to Olde Englewood Village, take I-75 north to exit 191 (River Road). Travel fourteen miles south on River Road, which eventually becomes Dearborn Street and leads into the village center. To get to Placida, take Route 775 south from Englewood until it meets with Route 771.

WHERE TO SHOP: In Olde Englewood Village, visit Grass Roots Gallery (411 W. Dearborn St., 941/473-8782, www.grassrootsfl.com) and Lemon Tree Gallery (420 W. Dearborn St., 941/474-5700, www.lemontreegallery.com) for works by Florida artists. The Glass Station (395 W. Dearborn St., 941/475-5010) features Tim Miller's colorful glass pieces. Antiques sources include Blue Pineapple (445 W. Dearborn St., 941/474-1504). Wish You Were Here (452 W. Dearborn St., 941/460-1829) stocks vintage and new tropical-themed home decor.

In Placida, the Margaret Albritton Gallery (13020 Fishery Rd., 941/698-0603) carries crafts, gifts, and the owner's hand-colored etchings.

WHERE TO EAT: In Englewood, The Cafe on Dearborn (470 W. Dearborn St., 941/474-3333) serves sandwiches and entrées with "Florida style, New England flavor." American Pie Ice Cream (446 W. Dearborn St., 941/473-3011) dishes out treats in an old-fashioned setting. In Placida, the Fishery Restaurant (13000 Fishery Rd., 941/697-2451, www.sunstate.com/fishery) serves fresh catches in a dining room with views of Gasparilla Sound.

WHERE TO EXPLORE: Traverse a Native American shell midden at Indian Mound Park (210 Winson Ave., Englewood, 941/861-1980, www.co.sarasota.fl.us). Spot wildlife

at Lemon Bay Park and Environmental Center (570 Bay Park Blvd., Englewood, 941/474-3065, www.co.sarasota.fl.us) and Cedar Point Environmental Park (2300 Placida Rd., Englewood, 941/475-0769, www.checflorida.org). Get a sense of Englewood's history at the Green Street Church Museum (416 Green St., Englewood, 941/473-8491). Take to the water on an excursion with Grande Tours (12575 Placida Rd., Placida, 941/697-8825, www.grandetours.com).

FOR MORE INFORMATION: Contact the Englewood Area Chamber of Commerce (941/474-5511, www.Englewoodchamber.com) or the Charlotte County Visitor's Bureau (941/743-1900, www.pureflorida.com) or visit the Olde Englewood Village Association's Web site at www.oldeenglewood.com.