

**Wimauma**  
**Lake Wimauma**  
**Gully Branch**

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5 pgs

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**HILLSBOROUGH COUNTY**  
**HISTORIC RESOURCES SURVEY REPORT**

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## *Wimauma*

Wimauma is near the Manatee County Line, just west of the intersection of County Road 579 and State Road 674. Pleasant Franklin Stanaland is the first known settler in the region that would become Wimauma. He moved from Thomasville, Georgia, to southern Hillsborough County around 1875 where he began growing citrus. Enough people lived in the region to organize the Fellowship Church, a hand-hewn log structure located about five miles east of present-day Wimauma until it burned down in 1968. With the birth of Plant City, Mr. Stanaland traveled two days by ox-drawn wagon to have his oranges packed for shipment. Not until the turn of the century would this portion of the county receive a rail connection.<sup>i</sup>

In 1902 Captain Davis and D.M. Dowdell, Davis' son-in-law, helped build the Seaboard Air Line railroad through the area, connecting Turkey Creek to Braidentown. Since the region was the half way point between these two communities, Captain Davis decided to build a town. Two of his first goals were the establishment of a depot and a post office. Davis named the post office and subsequently the town after his three daughters. Taking the first letters of each of their names, Willie, Maude, and Mary, Captain Davis christened the post office Wimauma on October 24, 1902. Five years later Wimauma was platted around Tiger Lake (present-day Lake Wimauma), with the railroad tracks constituting the community's western boundary.<sup>ii</sup>

The train opened up the area to sawmills, turpentine, truck farming, cattle raising, and a packing plant. With an eye for business, Captain Davis purchased large tracts of forested lands for their turpentine and railroad cross-tie potentials. By 1911, two general stores and the Florida Naval Stores, Lumber and Cattle Company operated in Wimauma. Mr. Dowdell was the primary truck grower in the region. The community also had a one-room log school house set up on a strawberry schedule so that the children could help their parents harvest their crops. In the early 1910s, the school was replaced by a two-story brick building, but it still kept a strawberry schedule. With all the success, Wimauma expanded with the Davis and Dowell addition in 1914, and Tiger Lake was officially changed to Lake Wimauma. Wimauma's population reached 500 in 1918. They supported three churches, three general stores, a physician, the Wimauma Fruit & Vegetable Company, and the Wimauma Naval Stores Company. Wimauma's population doubled to 1000 inhabitants in 1925. Along with this demographic explosion, the community now had four churches, four general stores, a notary, a fertilizer agent, a garage, a justice of the peace, and a physician. The population boom spurred the school board to erect a larger two-story brick school for area children in 1927. Sadly, the school board demolished the older brick building to construct the new one.<sup>iii</sup>

During this era of prosperity, Wimauma became the camp meeting location for the Church of God. Zeno Tharp, a Church of God minister, visited Wimauma in 1912 and found a ten acre plot of land desirable for camp meetings. Prior to this, meetings were held in Pleasant Grove at the Pleasant Grove Church of God. A crude pine building with only pine straw and sand as a floor was erected and the first meeting held in the fall of 1912. During its first years approximately 1000 people from all over the county attended

the 10 day meeting. From this humble beginning, attendance grew to over 10,000. Consequently, a larger hall had to be erected, and as the congregation grew new additions were added. Along with the church, two-story pine dormitories were also built to house the men, women, and children who traveled from all across the state, nation, and even other countries to attend meetings. In addition to the dormitories, approximately 200 privately owned cottages were constructed by church members. Today, the site has grown to 70-acres, but the meeting halls and dormitories have all been drastically altered from their original design. The 200 cottages still exist, with some full-time residents consisting of retired ministers and their spouses living in them.<sup>iv</sup>

Not everything succeeded in Wimauma, however. The Bank of Wimauma was built in the 1920s, but it failed before it could ever open its doors because of the Florida real estate and the stock market crashes. Another great scheme also failed to materialize. The Miami based Herzberg-Maner Realty Company bought 14,000-acres of Wimauma real estate, planning to develop the area into one of the premier agricultural centers of the state. Furthermore, the company wanted to build an exclusive country club around Tiger Lake, including a hotel and a golf course. A company spokesperson even touted that thousands of tourists would visit Wimauma. The plan came to naught as land values plummeted and the promoters' wealth dwindled.<sup>v</sup>

Wimauma became Hillsborough's fourth municipality in 1925, incorporating an area slightly larger than the 1907 plat. The town's charter called for a commission form of government with the Mayor, Vice-Mayor, and Town Clerk constituting the commission. Until elections could be held, W.B. McKenzie served as Mayor pro tem, R.T. Thomas became Vice-Mayor pro tem, and F.M. Carlton acted as the City Clerk pro tem. These three people were business leaders in the community. In 1918 Thomas had operated a general store. Just prior to Wimauma's incorporation Carlton was a notary and McKenzie owned a garage and served as justice of the peace. Representative of the time period, the municipality was given the power to segregate White, Black, and even foreign residents into separate wards. One interesting note in the language of the charter was the use of "he or she" when referring to the mayor, indicating that it was possible for a woman to be elected to the position even though it was socially improbable during the time period. Wimauma operated under this charter until 1931 when the revenue and taxation portion was changed. Evidently, Wimauma had been hurt during the stock market crash and there was an attempt to limit the municipality's exposure to the volatile market. It also appears that the charter was amended to strengthen the government's ability to collect taxes, indicating that Wimauma was hit hard by tax delinquency during the dark financial days of the 1930s.<sup>vi</sup>

Despite the setbacks of the 1930s, Wimauma sailed a steady course during the next three decades. A year after the end of World War II, nearly 1000 people lived in the greater Wimauma area. The community had three White churches, three Black churches, three gas stations, three stores, a physician, a depot, and a post office. Truck farming and citrus dominated the livelihood of most of Wimauma's residents. During this era, Wimauma's African Americans, like the majority of its Whites, worked in the farm fields, the sawmills, and later on in the phosphate industry. These jobs drew quite a few

Blacks to the area. Enough so to make African Americans 50 percent of the community's population. Even with such a large population, Wimauma's Black children had to travel to Tampa to receive a high school education because the local high school was segregated.<sup>vii</sup>

A series of freezes heavily damaged the area's citrus crops in the 1950s, forcing the community's packing house to close its doors. This setback did not impact the number of people living in Wimauma. Nearly 1200 people resided in and around the town with African Americans still constituting 50 percent of the population. Another 1300 people lived in a 69 mile radius of the town. Many of Wimauma's residents worked at U.S. Phosphoric, on the railroad, and the sawmills. These jobs help support the community's four service stations, two grocery stores, a post office, and a doctor.<sup>viii</sup> Through the 1960s and 1970s Wimauma experienced another series of changes. Until 1968 Wimauma served the region with freight, express, and direct passenger service all the way to New York City. Between 1968 and 1976, the station only shipped carloads of freight to Sun City Center, a few miles east of Wimauma. In the fall of 1976, the railroad shut Wimauma's station down. The citrus crop recovered from the freezes and began replacing many of the truck farms. With the elimination of Jim Crow laws, Wimauma's African-American population left farm work for better paying jobs. Mexican immigrants began to fill this agricultural void, and by the 1990s constituted a large portion of Wimauma's population. Between 1979 and 1990, Wimauma grew from nearly 1500 people to 2932, with 8497 living in the greater Wimauma area.<sup>ix</sup>

Sometime during the 1930s the City of Wimauma's government ceased to function. This fact would come back to haunt county officials. In 1993 it was accidentally discovered that Wimauma had been a city, but no one remembered it. The question then arose as to what to do with this forgotten municipality. It was finally decided that since the government had ceased to operate for 60 years that the community would remain just that, an unincorporated community.<sup>x</sup>

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i. Virginia Davis, "Smouldering Embers Leave only Old Church Memories," *Tampa Times* February 20, 1968; Mark Fisher, "Wimauma," *East Hillsborough Tribune* September 26, 1974, 6F.

ii. George Bentley, "Wimauma—It's Paleface Name," *Tampa Times* May 30, 1963; Bradbury and Hallock, *A Chronology of Florida Post Offices*, 89; D.M. Dowdell to Agnes, May 29, 1950 ("Davis" Hillsborough County Historical Commission family file, Tampa Bay History Center); "The Early History of Ruskin," 2; Juanita Greene, "Wimauma, 'Why Mama' to You Means Willie, Maude and Mary," *Tampa Times* November 7, 1946; Morris, *Florida Place Names*, 256; Plat Book 4, page 101, Clerk of the Circuit Court of Hillsborough County.

iii. Frank Bayle, "Wimauma is Secluded from County Growth," *Tampa Times* April 10, 1959, 5; Howard Brown, "Woman Recalls when Wimauma was like 'School in the Prairie,'" *Tampa Times* May 2, 1978; Dowdell to Agnes, May 29, 1950; *Florida State Gazetteer and Business Directory, 1911-1912*, 497; *Florida State Gazetteer and Business Directory, 1918*, 656; *Florida State Gazetteer and Business Directory, 1925*, 1104; Plat Book 1, page 136, Clerk of the Circuit Court of Hillsborough County.

iv. Carol Neef, "Church Gospel Camp Meeting is Prepared for Thousands," *Tampa Tribune* June 15, 1971; Carol Neef, "Preachers Find Shelter in Wimauma," *East Hillsborough Tribune* June 24, 1976, 4E.

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v. Bayle, "Wimauma is Secluded from County Growth," 1; Carol Neef, "Land Boom Never Materialized for Wimauma," *East Hillsborough Tribune* June 26, 1975.

vi. *Florida State Gazetteer and Business Directory, 1918*, 656; *Florida State Gazetteer and Business Directory, 1925*, 1104; *Laws of Florida, 1925, Chapter 11326–(No. 1304)*, 5030 - 5059; *Laws of Florida, 1931, Chapter 15594–(No. 956)*, 1935-1943. Copies of both *Laws of Florida* are in "Wimauma and Winona" Hillsborough County Historical Commission Miscellaneous file, Tampa Bay History Center. Hillsborough County's other three municipalities are Tampa, Plant City, and Temple Terrace.

vii. Greene, "Wimauma, 'Why Mama' to You Means Willie, Maude and Mary;" Lindsay Peterson, "Wimauma Struggles to Quell Reputation as a Problem Town," *Tampa Tribune* February 4, 1987, 1EH.

viii. Bayle, "Wimauma is Secluded from County Growth," 1.

ix. Hillsborough County Housing Assistance Department, *Wimauma Redevelopment Plan* (Tampa, FL: Hillsborough County Housing Assistance Department Planning Section, 1979), 1; Carol Neef, "Hear that Lonesome Whistle Blow," *East Hillsborough Tribune* March 30, 1978; Peterson, "Wimauma Struggles to Quell Reputation as a Problem Town," 1EH.

x. Steve Otto, "Speed Bump has Delusions of Grandeur," *Tampa Tribune* July 30, 1993; Lindsay Peterson, "Forgotten Charter Makes Wimauma a City," *Tampa Tribune* July 28, 1993, 1,5; Lindsay Peterson, "Attorney Tells City Slickers to Cool Heels," July 30, 1998, 1Metro, 3Metro; Lindsay Peterson, "Meeting to Focus on Wimauma's Status as City," *Tampa Tribune* October 3, 1993; Lindsay Peterson, "Wimauma Debates Merits of City Status," *Tampa Tribune* October 5, 1993.