

**Peru**  
**Alafia River**

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

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\* These excerpts have been taken from the Historic Resources Survey Report with permission given by the Hillsborough County Historic Resources Review Board on December 15, 2003. The intention is to help provide targeted historical information on the water bodies in Hillsborough County.

## *Peru*

Peru was one of Hillsborough County's earliest settlements, situated on the south side of the Alafia River near the intersection of U.S. 301 and Balm-Riverview Road, dating back to the early 1840s. However, Riverview eclipsed, and eventually consumed Peru during the 20th century. Taking advantage of The Armed Occupation Act of 1842, Benjamin Moody settled in the area to raise cattle. Born in Telfair County, Georgia, the 1850 census listed Moody as a 39 year old widowed farmer, with four daughters and two sons, owning \$500 worth of real estate. Moody became one of Hillsborough County's first County Commissioners in 1846. Other people followed Mr. Moody's lead, and settled on the south side of the river.<sup>i</sup>

As the area's population grew, religious, commercial, and educational needs came to the forefront. Around 1850, Mr. Moody donated the land upon which the Methodist church was constructed. George Simmons, another early settler, helped in the construction. In 1850, George Simmons was a 30 year old laborer born in Georgia. Consisting of a small log cabin, the church served four families. In 1870, Leroy Lesley, a pastor, built a new sanctuary near his Alafia ferry operation. The church was renamed Lesley Chapel. In 1866, William Moody opened a general store west of present day U.S. 301, providing residents with supplies and mail obtained by boat from Tampa. On December 8, 1870, Peru officially obtained a post office, with J.M. Boyett serving as Peru's first postmaster. While taking a few years longer to officially establish a school, it appears that a school initially operated out of the church Mr. Moody built on his property as early as 1875. On September 1, 1885, J.M. Boyett, G.M. Parrish, and O.P. Busbee served as trustees of the school.<sup>ii</sup>

A July 15, 1880, *Sunland Tribune* article provided a description of Peru:

...Peru is situated on the Alafia river about two miles from its mouth. It is southeast from Tampa, the distance being fourteen miles by land, twelve by water, and M.J. Boyett's store near Leslie's ferry is nearly the central point. I did not intend to convey the impression that it is a town, or even a village, but a closely settled neighborhood whose citizens are intelligently wide awake to the best and most important interest to their community, county, State and entire country.<sup>iii</sup>

Of Peru's 81 farmers in 1884, they controlled 5878 acres of land. The smallest farm consisted of 10 acres and H.H. Freer's farm, the largest, had 183 acres. Seventy-three acres was the average size. While raising sheep and cattle, farmers also grew guavas, potatoes, sugar cane, oranges, cabbage, and turnips. Nathan Boyette, Samuel E. Mays, Benjamin Moody, and I.H. Pelham were the area's largest orange growers. With four general stores, a public school, and two churches in 1886, property values ranged from five dollars to a whopping 200 dollars an acre. According to J.J. Boyett, the local land agent, James M. Boyett sold \$18,000 worth of goods from his store in 1886.<sup>iv</sup>

A resident described Peru housing in the May 25, 1882, issue of *The Sunland Tribune*:

The cost of building is but a trifle compared with the cost in other countries. Good pine boards can be procured at \$11.00 per m. at the mills. No plastering is required as you only need shelter and shade, and the broad old fashioned piazza with chair and benches outside bespeak the hospitality that seems to exist in the home of the rich and the cottage of the poor. The houses are all built at least two feet from the ground, on piers or blocks to give circulation of air, and without cellars.<sup>v</sup>

Peru grew to such an extent that it was platted in March, 1887, on the south side of the Alafia River, in Township 30S, Range 20E, Section 17 (Figure ? : Peru Plat). Its population sprouted to 373 people by 1890, and even supported a doctor and his drug store. However, signs began to show that the prosperity would not last forever. During the late 1880s phosphate was discovered on the Alafia, and a processing plant was constructed near Peru in the early 1890s, but on the river's north side. Three companies, The Peruvian Phosphate Co., The Tampa Phosphate Co., and The Alafia River Phosphate Co., operated on the Alafia, producing 2000 tons of phosphate in 1890 and an estimated 8000 tons in 1891. The river's phosphate boom was short lived, but it survived long enough to fertilize the seeds of Riverview. By 1894 the Peruvian Phosphate Company had gone out of business, but the Tampa Phosphate Co. continued to operate near Peru and the Alafia River Phosphate Co. operated out of Turkey Creek. Compared to its land based cousins, river mining proved too expensive, and river production began a steady decline in 1894. Peru experienced another loss when in 1895 the Methodist church moved across the river due to the north side's population growth. Furthermore, on December 31, 1900, Peru's post office was closed, and mail was delivered from Riverview. In 1901, delivering the mail across the river became easier when a bridge was built and the ferry abandoned.<sup>vi</sup>

Despite the exodus of institutions to the north side of the river, people continued to reside in Peru. At the turn of the century, 470 people called Peru home. Ten years later, Peru grew to 602 individuals. In 1916, a few family names associated with early settlers south of the Alafia were still to be found owning property in Peru, such as Mays and Myers. Other names like Moody were relocated north of the river. By the 1920s, Peru had lost its identity, being consumed by Riverview, which by then existed on both sides of the Alafia. Agriculture still dominated the area, with people truck farming and growing citrus.<sup>vii</sup>

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i."Actual Settlements in Florida, Under the Armed Occupation Law," House of Representatives, Document Number 70, 28th Congress, 1st Session, 1844, page 11; "Benjamin Moody 1811-1896," *South Florida Pioneers* 8(April, 1976),9-11; Norma Goolsby Frazier, "Pioneering on the Lower Alafia and the Early Settlement of Peru," *Sunland Tribune* 18(1)(November, 1992), 85-87; *Hillsborough County, Florida, 1850 Census* (Jacksonville, Fl: The Southern Genealogist's Exchange Society, Inc., 1975), 10.

ii.Bradbury and Hallock, *A Chronology of Florida Post Offices, 52; Hillsborough County, Florida, 1850 Census*, 34; Frazier, "Pioneering on the Lower Alafia and the Early Settlement of Peru," 88,90; Norma G. Frazier, "'River of Fire' for Early Settler," *Brandon News* March 30, 1977; Carol Neef, "First Settled in

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1842, Riverview Rolls Along," *Tampa Tribune* January 17, 1971, 3-B; "Peru, Fla., May 24th, 1880," *The Sunland Tribune* June 3, 1880, 3; Robinson, *History of Hillsborough County, Florida*, 80-81; Garnet K. Tien, "A History of the Methodist Church at Riverview," (copy on file USF Special Collections, Hampton Dunn Collection, Hillsborough County #1 file); *When History was in the Making, the Neighborhood Origins of Public Schools in Hillsborough County, 1871-1900*, 6-7.

iii. "Peru, Fla., July 6th, 1880," *The Sunland Tribune* July 15, 1880, 3.

iv. *Florida State Gazetteer and Business Directory, 1883-1884*, 361; *Florida State Gazetteer and Business Directory, 1886-1887*, 367; "Peru Dots," *The Sunland Tribune* August 24, 1882, 1; "Peru, Florida," *Tampa Weekly Journal* June 23, 1887; "Peru Items," *The Sunland Tribune* January 12, 1882, 2; April 13, 1882, 2; June 15, 1882, 3; October 12, 1882, 1; "Peru Brevities," *Tampa Weekly Tribune* October 13, 1893, 1; "Peru Notes," *Tampa Weekly Tribune* October 20, 1893, 8; Webb, *Webb's Florida Historical, Industrial, and Biographical*, 58.

v. "Letter from Florida," *The Sunland Tribune* May 25, 1882, 1.

vi. Arch Fredrick Blakey, *The Florida Phosphate Industry: A History of the Development and Use of a Vital Mineral* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1973), 42-43, 158; Frazier, "Pioneering on the Lower Alafia and the Early Settlement of Peru," 92; C.C. Hoyer Millar, *Florida, South Carolina, and Canadian Phosphates* (London: Eden Fisher & Co., 1892), 49, 51; Plat Book 1, page 13, Clerk of the Circuit Court of Hillsborough County, Tampa, Florida; "Peru Brevities," *Tampa Weekly Tribune* October 13, 1893, 1; "Points from Peru," *Tampa Tribune* July 10, 1890, 8; Robinson, *History of Hillsborough County Florida*, 81; *Tampa Tribune* June 26, 1890, 6; Tein, n.p.; U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Compendium of the Eleventh Census, 1890, Part I-Population*, 88; U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Report on Mineral Industries in the United States at the Eleventh Census: 1890* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1892), 689.

vii. *Atlas of Hillsborough County, Florida*, 57; Federal Writers' Project, *Seeing Tampa*, 120; Frazier, "Pioneering on the Lower Alafia and the Early Settlement of Peru," 92; Mrs. E.E. Lillibridge, "Riverview is a Rich Agricultural Section with Interesting History," *Plant City Courier* September 27, 1927; Carol Neef, "First Settled in 1842, Riverview Rolls Along," *Tampa Tribune* January 17, 1971, 1-B,3-B; Robinson, *History of Hillsborough County, Florida*, 315; U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Census Reports, Volume I, Twelfth Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1900, Population, Part I*, 93; U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Thirteenth Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1910, Abstract of the Census*, 575.