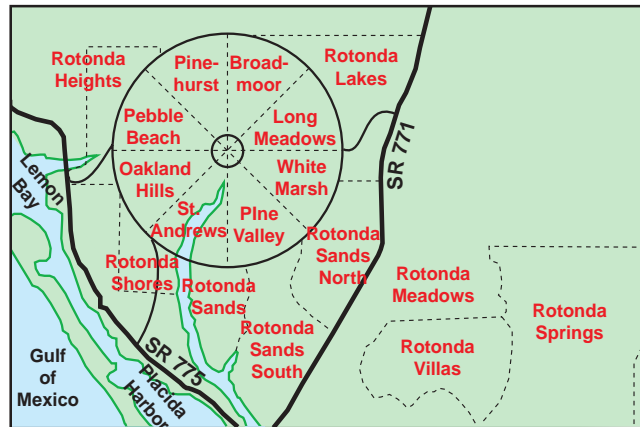


## Case Studies: Rotonda West, Cape Coral, Marco Island



One of the most notable features of Southwest Florida waterways is the growth and development of canalfront residential communities. As discussed in the preceding chapter, dredging during the two decades following World War II led to the creation of multiple canal systems where thousands of saltwater-accessible parcels were carved out of wetlands to satisfy a market for water-oriented single-family homes. More than half of the waterways in the region are of this form. The unparalleled construction frenzy during the 1950s and 1960s which led to the creation of these canal waterfront communities, prompted public concerns about a deteriorating coastal environment, shrinking public access to waterfront areas, and fears about the loss of sensitive habitats for wildlife. Land-

mark legislation, passed by Congress in the early 1970s to rein in wide-scale wetland destruction, brought an abrupt halt to this canal development process. The Environmental Protection Act (1970) created the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the Clean Water Act (1972), and the Endangered Species Act (1973), all have fundamentally changed waterfront development practices and curtailed waterway maintenance practices. Three cases – Rotonda West (Charlotte County), Cape Coral (Lee County), and Marco Island (Collier County) — help to explain how such widespread waterway construction evolved and demonstrate the effects of multiple canal systems on the local geographic setting.



Map 1.  
Rotonda subdivisions.



Rotonda (circular shape on the left side of photo); view south with Stump Pass in the foreground; Gasparilla Pass upper right, Charlotte Harbor in background.



Cape Coral looking Southwest across Redfish Point and the Caloosahatchee with Punta Rassa on the extreme right.



South Marco Island and Roberts Bay in foreground, looking Southwest out Caxambas Pass.

## The Vision of Rotonda West: A Self-Contained Circular Community of 50,000

Promoted as “one of the most exciting concepts in planning,” Rotonda West has made an indelible imprint, both perceived and real, on the Southwest Florida landscape. Situated on Cape Haze peninsula between Buck and Coral Creeks in Charlotte County, it epitomizes the quest for building waterfront property that dominated much of this region’s residential developments of the 1960s era. Imagine — “a brand new, community-in-the-round, a unique circle of eight pie-slice-shaped subdivisions, seven with their own golf courses and marinas, the eighth with a broad waterway (Coral Creek), the whole community surrounded by a circular waterway, offering, in all, 32 miles of navigable, blue-green waterways well-stocked with freshwater fish.” That “vision” — of each homesite overlooking a canal, golf course, landscaped green belt or recreational waterway, and with each homeowner provided unlimited access to a private Gulf beach on Don Pedro Island — was offered to the public in 1969 by Cavanagh Leasing Corp. Map 1 shows Rotonda’s subdivisions within and outside the “wheel”.

Cavanagh purchased the property from the Vanderbilt family (descendants of Cornelius Vanderbilt) who had built the 35,000 acre 2-V Ranch for breeding Santa Gertrudis cattle. The land, only a few feet above mean sea level, had been covered years earlier with pine forest, but the timber had been cut down for lumber and naval stores by a succession of owners, including the Gainesville, Ocala and Charlotte Harbor Railroad (forerunner of the Florida Southern Railway Company).

Figure 1 shows pre-development conditions that prevailed in 1951. The Vanderbilts’ improvements to the land for cattle grazing included building a dam on West Coral Creek to block salt water from infiltrating the fresh water runoff from the uplands. They also developed Cape Haze, an upscale residential community adjoining the Rotonda property between Coral Creek and Placida Harbor.

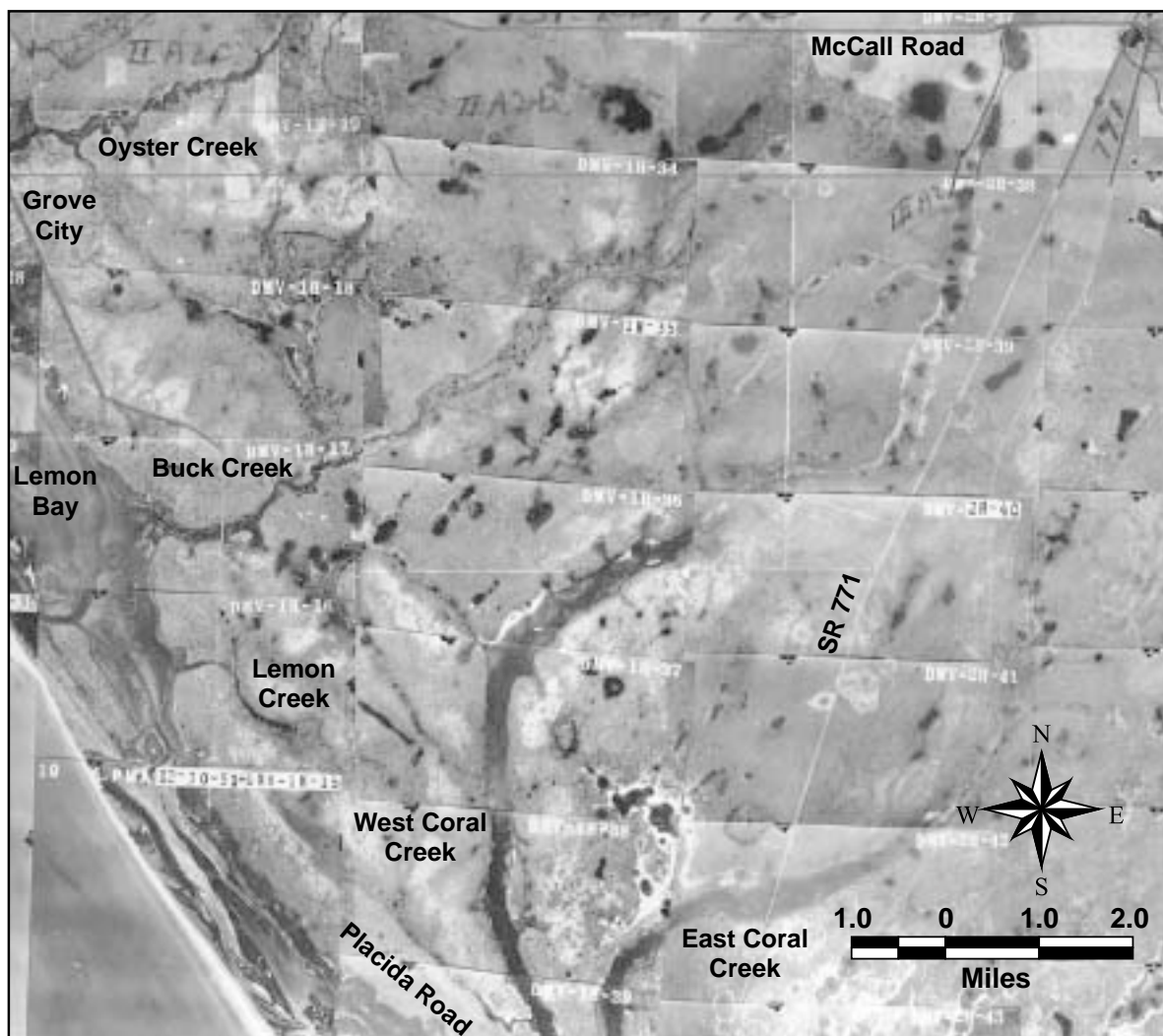


Figure 1. Rotonda aerial mosaic, 1951.

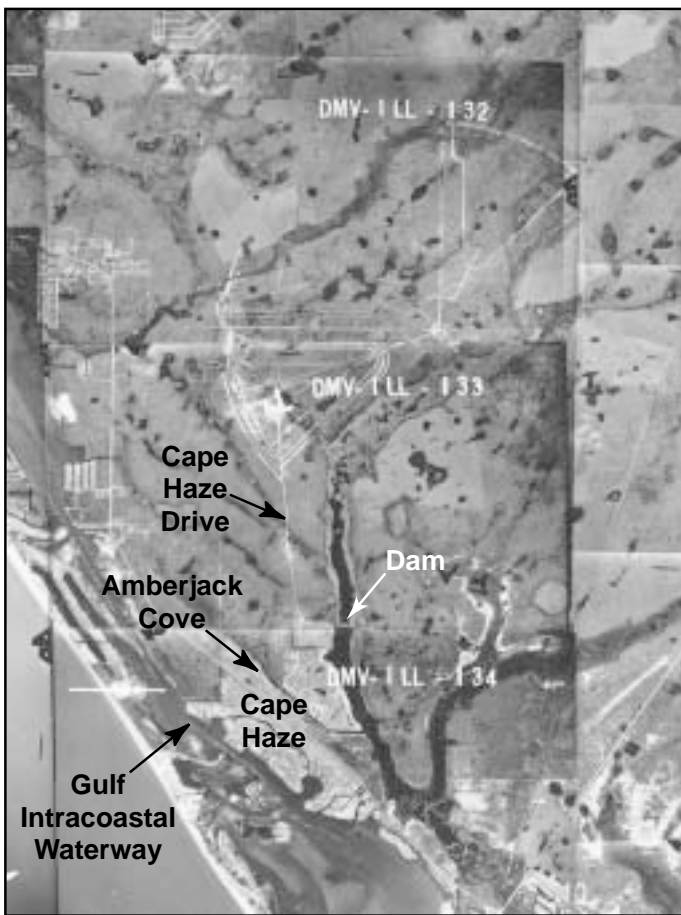


Figure 2. Rotonda aerial mosaic, 1970.

Figure 2 shows conditions in early 1970, the take-off year of Rotonda's development. The Vanderbilts' Cape Haze waterfront property had been cleared and bulkheaded, and finger canals had been dredged; the Gulf Intracoastal Waterway had established the inland waterway link between Placida Harbor and Lemon Bay; dredging was underway in Amberjack Cove (a natural slough); and the Vanderbilts' dam had been built across West Coral Creek. Parts of the Rotonda 'wheel' are visible, such as the west, north, and east sectors of Rotonda Circle, the hub, and construction within the Oakland Mills subdivision.



Figure 3. Rotonda aerial photograph, 1975.

Figure 3 shows the development in 1975. Eleven miles of canals, 6 feet deep and 60 feet wide, had been dredged in Oakland Hills, Pebble Beach and Pinehurst subdivisions. Deepwater canals crisscrossed the 2,600-acre Rotonda Sands area, between East and West Coral Creeks. About 600 homes were complete by 1976, mostly in Oakland Hills.

The Rotonda 'vision' promised an idyllic, Shangri-La lifestyle and implied access to Gulf waters. However, the developer was unable to forecast mounting public concerns about the health of the environment and passage of legislation, by 1975, that would halt unbridled destruction of wetlands. One consequence of the new laws was a decision never to dismantle the dam across West Coral Creek; Gulf access would not exist. Construction was halted on the environmentally sensitive wetlands areas, effectively blocking development of the St. Andrews and Rotonda Sands subdivisions. Figure 3 (1975) shows initial land clearance and canal construction within the subdivisions adjoining West and East Coral Creeks. In 1976, Deltona Corporation, the land development company headed by the Mackle family, assumed management of the Rotonda properties. The state eventually purchased the marginal lands in 1998 under the Environmentally Endangered Lands Act Cape Haze/Charlotte Harbor CARL (P2000) purchase.

Today's Rotonda is part of that pre-1975 "dream" and part post-legislation reality. Cavanagh's dream waterfront community, with Gulf access, is still perpetuated on some contemporary street maps. Modern (1995) aerial photography (Figure 4) shows a very different landscape: relict canals on the undevelopable St. Andrews and Rotonda Sands subdivisions outside the wheel; buildout of homesites within the wheel's western sectors of Oakland

Mills and Pebble Beach; a moderate level of home-building in the northern Pinehurst and Broadmoor subdivisions; and negligible construction in the east and southeast White Marsh and Pine Valley areas. The Rotonda of today is a community shaped by a vision of outdoor living, Florida style, and attuned to pursuing that dream in an environmentally sustainable fashion.



Figure 4. Rotonda aerial photograph, 1999.

## Creating a Waterfront Wonderland at Cape Coral

The Caloosahatchee Riverfront was a prime target for residential land development during the years following World War II. As service personnel returned to the United States and retirees began searching for affordable housing, the region's warm climate, laidback lifestyle, and cheap undeveloped land provided unparalleled incentives for economic growth and development. The Rosen brothers — Leonard and Jack — recognized an opportunity to profit by selling the American Dream, affordable hous-

ing on the installment plan. In 1957, they purchased for \$125,000 a 1,724-acre parcel at Redfish Point on the north bank of the Caloosahatchee. The Rosens would turn that investment into a fortune of over \$100 million by 1970 and create the largest land sales operation, Gulf American Corporation, in the United States. Their real estate business was a pioneer in using mail-order sales, television advertising, giveaways, and popular culture celebrities as company spokespersons.



Cape Coral looking northeast up the Caloosahatchee with Redfish Point on lower right.

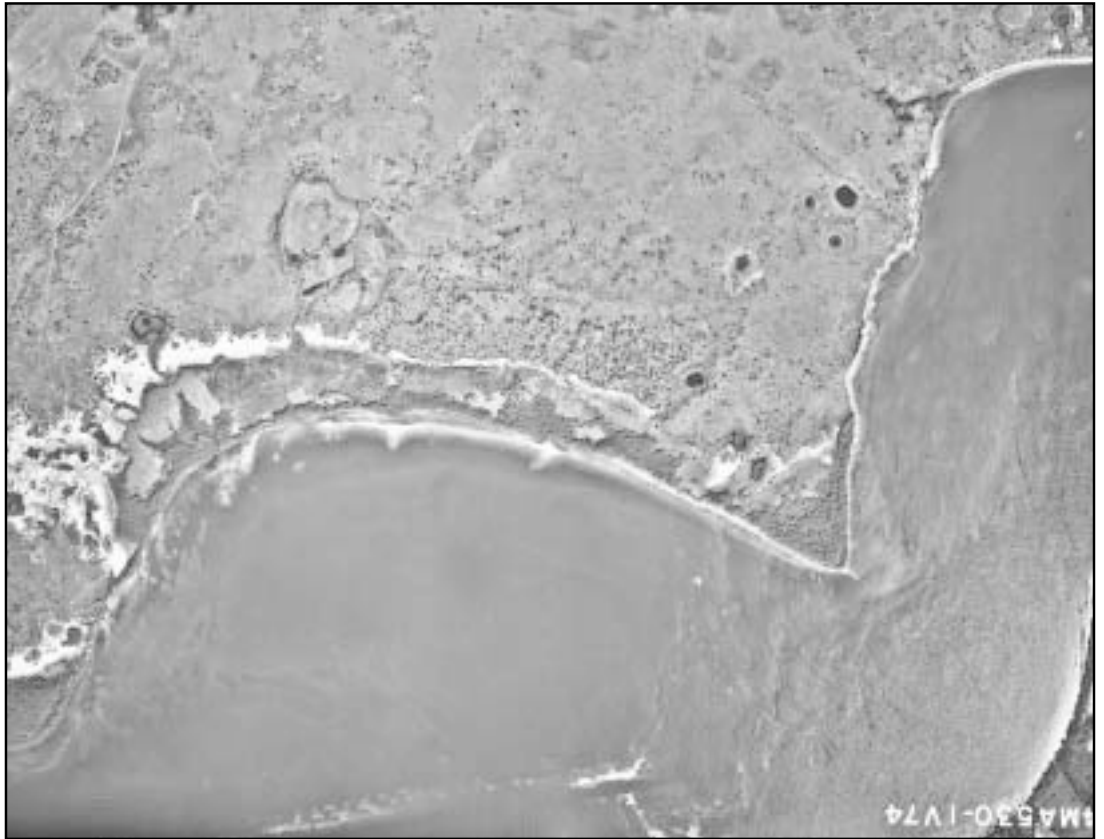


Figure 5. Redfish Point, 1944.



Figure 6. Dredge *Oliver Douglas*, 1962.

In the early 1940s, Redfish Point was uninhabited (Figure 5). Dense mangroves extended inland for 100 yards from the shoreline. The remainder of the property was only several feet above sea level and covered with grasslands, palmettos and second-growth pines. Since local land use regulations mandated homesite construction at a minimum 5.5 feet above sea level, the Rosens concluded that dredging would be needed to provide fill material. Gulf American refined the ‘finger-landings’ dredge method of excavating canals so that most buildable lots fronted on waterways. A grid-patterned development produced the largest number of homesites. Though the main objective was to create land for home construction, the use of dredge-and-fill produced a suburban landscape of artificial canals, waterways and basins, the outlines of which were dictated by the amount of fill required at a given location. As a result, canal width and depth varies within Cape Coral: some waterways, such as in the Yacht Club area, are nearly 200 feet wide and over 30 feet deep; whereas canals located farther inland on higher elevation uplands are only 80 feet wide and 6- to 15-feet deep.