Perhaps the best way to understand the dynamic changes that Southwest Florida has undergone is through the photographic record of waterway alterations. In the last 100-plus years, Southwest Florida’s shorefront has changed from a collection of rural, desolate areas of scrub, mangrove, and salt marsh dotted with sleepy agricultural and fishing communities into a vibrant, growing urban area lush with bustling cities and vast residential developments.

The following descriptions, in words and pictures, offer a glimpse of Southwest Florida as it once was and how it has changed. Map 1 shows locations of the areas described.
Map 1.
Photo record case studies.
1. Downtown Punta Gorda Waterfront

Downtown Punta Gorda Waterfront changes are captured in maps and photographs from 1921 to present day. The Army Engineers 1921 maps (Figures 1A and 1B) shows existing waterfront conditions and those from an earlier time. In 1885-86, the railroad completed a spur to (a) Old Long Dock (Old Cattle Wharf on map), the first modern dock facility used by commercial fishermen to off-load fresh fish packed in ice and to ship their catch by rail to United States markets. In 1897, Long Dock was abandoned (later destroyed) for the Atlantic Coast Line railroad dock (b) at King Street. City Wharf (Figure 1A, c), at the foot of Sullivan Street (Figure 1C), was destroyed in 1921.

A fire in 1915 destroyed the fish houses on the King Street Dock, but some were rebuilt. Figure 1B shows fish houses and ship chandleries on the King Street Dock (b) and the Ice Wharf (d) at the foot of the alley to the east. The riverfront between King and Nesbit Streets was lined with small marine ways, boat repair facilities, and a blacksmith shop (e). Fishing boats, like the auxiliary-powered schooner Roamer (Figure 1D), operated from Punta Gorda during this era. The Nesbit Street Bridge (Figure 1B, f) was a county road that spanned the Peace River from Punta Gorda to Live Oak Point and Charlotte Harbor Town. The King Street Dock (Figure 1B, b) was removed in the late 1920s in order to build the modern bridge right of way. A residential district along Retta (Esplanade) Avenue had been laid out early in the city’s history (Figure 1E).

The aerial photograph in Figure 1F shows early 1940s waterfront conditions; antecedent structures described above are outlined in red. Note the old bridge approach at the foot of Nesbit Street. The area to the west had been filled. An old landmark hotel (g) remained from bygone days, as did the abandoned railroad spur to the Old Cattle Wharf. By the early 1940s, a dredged boat basin and pier (h) occupied the present-day location of Fishermen’s Village. The City’s riverfront park (i) at Retta Esplanade was an open space.

Figure 1A. Punta Gorda downtown, 1921.
Figure 1B. Punta Gorda downtown (detailed plan), 1921.
The modern waterfront (Figure 1G) shows a completely transformed urban space. The old Nesbit Street County Bridge is replaced by two separate fixed spans — southbound traffic on Gilchrist Bridge and northbound on Collier Bridge. Commercial marine facilities have given way to service retail outlet stores and hotels. The open space along Retta Esplanade is Gilchrist Park. A time-share duplex with retail shopping, restaurants and modern marina — Fishermen’s Village — occupies the commercial fish pier at the former location of the Old Cattle Dock. Land has been filled out into the river to provide buildable space for these expanding services. The old-town atmosphere and early 1900s buildings, especially old homes, are retained along Marion and Olympia and west of Nesbit.
Punta Gorda Isles

Punta Gorda Isles is illustrative of the most dramatic changes in waterway development — namely, those directly tied to dredge-and-fill — which made land available for residential use. In 1944 (Figure 2A), much of the area was scrub, unimproved pasture, and wetland. By 1972 (Figure 2B), Alligator Creek (a) had artificial canals extending north into Charlotte Park (b) and Riviera (c), while most of the canals north of Aqui Esta Drive (d) in Punta Gorda Isles had been created. By 1995 (Figure 2C), the entire canal system, as it exists today, comprised over 2,000 salt-water parcels with access channels north to the Peace River, or through Ponce de Leon Channel (e) and Alligator Creek (a) to Charlotte Harbor.
Punta Blanca Settlement

Punta Blanca's Settlement, which occupied the south tip of the island until the late 1950s, typifies the smaller, self-contained fishing communities that dotted the Charlotte Harbor shoreline in the early 20th century. Settled by some of the same fishing families that populated Cayo Costa, Boca Grande, and Pine Island, some 15 households lived there in the years preceding World War II. The village included a schoolhouse and general store. Small-boat repairs and fishing were the mainstays of the economy.

The aerial view taken in 1944 shows many features of the historic settlement (Figure 3A). The dredged approach channel (a) and boat basin (b) are prominent elements. Note the fish-house (c) south of the entrance to the approach channel, which was a favorite photo subject of boaters heading down Pine Island Sound channel until it burned in 1995 (Figure 3B). Prop-wash of the run-boats, as they came alongside and serviced the fish-house, created the shoal (d). The boat building shed at (e) had a marine ways used for launching. Other structures shown on the photo are the school (f), general store (g), community dock (h) and out-houses (i).

The settlement had one telephone, connected to Boca Grande by an underwater cable crossing the inlet and overhead wires strung on poles across Pelican Bay. School-age children from neighboring islands were shuttled to and from Punta Blanca until the school burned down in the late 1950s and Lee County terminated boat pickup service.

Today, little remains of this pioneer fishing community (Figure 3C). The site is overgrown with exotic vegetation, mostly Australian pine. The wellhead pipe of an artesian spring that once supplied drinking water rotted out years ago. The dredged entrance channel still accommodates deep-draft boats that venture into the basin and seek shelter from northers during the winter season.