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United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
REGISTRATION FORM

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If any item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer, to complete all items.

1. Name of Property

historic name GULFPORT CASINO

other names/site number Gulfport Casino Ballroom; FMSF#PI02363

2. Location

street & number 5500 Shore Boulevard N/A  not for publication

city or town Gulfport N/A  vicinity

state FLORIDA code FL county Pinellas code 103 zip code 33707

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, I hereby certify that this  nomination  request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property  meets  does not meet the National Register criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant  nationally  statewide  locally. ( See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Glissa Sade Llane 6/19/14  
Signature of certifying official/Title Date

Deputy State Historic Preservation Officer, Division of Historical Resources  
State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property  meets  does not meet the National Register criteria. ( See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of certifying official/Title Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that the property is:

- entered in the National Register
  - See continuation sheet
- determined eligible for the National Register
  - See continuation sheet.
- determined not eligible for the National Register
  - See continuation sheet.
- removed from the National Register.
- other, (explain) \_\_\_\_\_

Edson H. Beall 8-8-14  
Signature of the Keeper Date of Action

**5. Classification**

**Ownership of Property**  
(Check as many boxes as apply)

- private
- public-local
- public-State
- public-Federal

**Category of Property**  
(Check only one box)

- buildings
- district
- site
- structure
- object

**Number of Resources within Property**  
(Do not include any previously listed resources in the count)

Contributing	Noncontributing	
1	0	buildings
0	0	sites
0	0	structures
0	0	objects
1	0	total

**Name of related multiple property listings**  
(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing.)

N/A

**Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register**

0

**6. Function or Use**

**Historic Functions**  
(Enter categories from instructions)

SOCIAL/Meeting Hall

RECREATION AND CULTURE/Auditorium

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**Current Functions**  
(Enter categories from instructions)

SOCIAL/Meeting Hall

RECREATION AND CULTURE/Auditorium

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**7. Description**

**Architectural Classification**  
(Enter categories from instructions)

NO STYLE

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**Materials**  
(Enter categories from instructions)

foundation Concrete

walls Wood

Brick

roof Asphalt

other \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**Narrative Description**  
(Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

**8. Statement of Significance**

**Applicable National Register Criteria**

(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

- A** Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- B** Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- C** Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- D** Property has yielded, or is likely to yield information important in prehistory or history.

**Criteria Considerations**

(Mark "x" in all the boxes that apply.)

Property is:

- A** owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- B** removed from its original location.
- C** a birthplace or grave.
- D** a cemetery.
- E** a reconstructed building, object, or structure.
- F** a commemorative property.
- G** less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years

**Narrative Statement of Significance**

(Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

**9. Major Bibliographical References**

**Bibliography**

Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

**Previous documentation on file (NPS):**

- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 36) has been requested
- previously listed in the National Register
- previously determined eligible by the National Register
- designated a National Historic Landmark
- recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # \_\_\_\_\_
- recorded by Historic American Engineering Record

**Areas of Significance**

(Enter categories from instructions)

RECREATION/ENTERTAINMENT

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**Period of Significance**

1935-1963

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**Significant Dates**

1935

1950

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**Significant Person**

N/A

**Cultural Affiliation**

N/A

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**Architect/Builder**

Arch: Unknown

Blder: Unknown

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**Primary location of additional data:**

- State Historic Preservation Office
- Other State Agency
- Federal agency
- Local government
- University
- Other

Name of Repository

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# \_\_\_\_\_

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property Less than 1

UTM References

(Place additional references on a continuation sheet.)

1	1	7	3	3	1	6	6	1	3	0	6	9	2	9	2
	Zone		Easting						Northing						
2															

3															
	Zone		Easting						Northing						
4															

See continuation sheet

Verbal Boundary Description

(Describe the boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet.)

Boundary Justification

(Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet.)

11. Form Prepared By

name/title Frederick J. Metcalf, Community Development Director

organization City of Gulfport date March 2014

street & number 2401 53rd Street South telephone (727) 893-1095

city or town Gulfport state Florida zip code 33707

Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

Continuation Sheets

Maps

A USGS map (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.

A Sketch map for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.

Photographs

Representative black and white photographs of the property.

Additional items

(check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items)

Property Owner

(Complete this item at the request of SHPO or FPO.)

name City of Gulfport

street & number 2401 53rd Street South telephone (727) 893-1095

city or town Gulfport state Florida zip code 33707

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and amend listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C. 470 et seq.).

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18.1 hours per response including time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Chief, Administrative Services Division, National Park Service, P.O. Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127; and the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reductions Projects (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20503.

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NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section number 7 Page 1

GULFPORT CASINO  
GULFPORT, PINELLAS COUNTY, FLORIDA  
DESCRIPTION

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**SUMMARY**

The Gulfport Casino is located on Boca Ciega Bay at 5500 Shore Boulevard at the intersection of Beach Boulevard. The casino is a basically one-story gable-roofed wood frame structure with an asphalt shingled pent roof. The lower main facade of the building consists of a brick vestibule entrance framed by two entryway doors and two display windows. This historic entryway is currently non-functional. The present main entrance is located at the west side of the building. With the exception of the brick entryway, the rest of the building is sided with asbestos shingles and large picture windows along the sides and rear. The casino sits on a concrete block piling foundation. The interior of the building contains a large dance floor flanked by areas for tables and chairs. The property is in excellent condition and continues to be used for a variety of cultural events. A number of dance groups routinely use the casino on a weekly basis for the dance floor as it remains one of the few of this caliber found in this area for such events. The city also uses the space for public meetings and offers it for lease for private functions. The proximity to the water makes it popular for wedding receptions. The period of significance is from 1935-1963.

**Exterior**

The historic main facade of the casino faces north on Shore Boulevard (Photos 1-2). The lower facade, with its stepped parapet is constructed of brick and houses the stage that overlooks the dance floor. This section of the building abuts the area housing the dance floor and side aisles. The wall has an arched parapet, but the main block of the building has a gable roof, atop which are found mushroom shaped air vents. The historic double-door entrances are sheltered by flat one-story porches supported by pipe columns. Flanking the porches are two one-story wings with flat roofs that have tripartite picture windows. These spaces are used for storage. The main entrance is found on the west side of the building (Photos 3-4). Wooden steps with vinyl railings at the sides and in the center rise to a wood deck sheltered by a gable-roofed canopy supported by pipe columns. The elevation has two sets of glass and wood double doors that provide access to the casino (Photo 5). The fenestration is a continuous series of wide and narrow 2/1-light metal sash windows. The deck is also accessed on the east elevation by a handicap ramp found at the front of the building. The east elevation is similar to the one on the west.

On the east elevation, wooden deck flanked by pipe railings provides access to two wood and glass double doors (Photos 6-7). The windows on this elevation are 2/2-light metal sashes. The casino has retained its connection to boating, with a wooden pier connecting with the east side of the building (Photos 8-9). The pier connects to a floating dingy dock and five transient slips used for water access to the casino and the waterfront redevelopment area. The (rear) south elevation is two stories in height and has four irregularly spaced 2/2-light metal sash windows (Photo 10). An aluminum curtain wall surrounds the HV/AC unit that provides air conditioning for the casino. A small one-story shed-roof addition on the southwest corner of the building houses the kitchen. A small picnic area with concrete tables and benches occupy a small patio accessed by the

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GULFPORT CASINO  
GULFPORT, PINELLAS COUNTY, FLORIDA  
DESCRIPTION

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walkways found on both the east and west elevations of the casino. In 2003, the entrance was moved to the west side of the building and extensive outdoor wood and concrete patios were added.

**Interior**

The interior of the building consists of a large dance floor 100 feet long by 56 feet wide. A stage and arched band shell are found at the north end of the building (Photo 11). Bordering the dance floor are arched side aisles for tables and chairs (Photos 12-14). Around 1958, the dance floor was enlarged and air conditioning was added. In the 1960s, acoustic tile was installed. Recessed lighting fixtures and insulation were added, and the crystal chandeliers date from this time. The ladies restroom was enlarged and ceramic tile flooring and wainscoting were installed in both restrooms. The bar was moved from the rear (south side) of the building to the west side to open up the waterfront view from the rear windows. The Gulfport Casino features a variety of events but, its patrons favor traditional ballroom dances (Photos 15-16).

**ALTERATIONS**

A major alteration to the building was made in 1950, when the original 1935 facade pavilion, with its central arched entranceway flanked by two-story domed towers, was removed and replaced with the one-story masonry pavilion that houses the stage and band shell. The facade was widened to contain two small shop fronts. The original wood frame windows were replaced with metal sash windows. In 2003, the entrance was moved to the west side of the building and extensive outdoor wood and concrete patios were added. A sea wall built around the structure and filled with sand to protect the piers has been upgraded over the years. Eventually, fill was used to raise the grade around the casino to its present floor level and new walkways with railings were constructed on the sides of the building.

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Section number 8 Page 1 GULFPORT CASINO  
GULFPORT, PINELLAS COUNTY, FLORIDA  
SIGNIFICANCE

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**SUMMARY**

The Gulfport Casino is significant at the local level under Criterion A in the area of Recreation/Entertainment. The building is significant as a community dance hall and meeting place for the city of Gulfport and for visitors attending dances and other entertainments in the building. The casino dominates the history of Gulfport and is tied to its development as a major element of transportation in its early days and by providing an entertainment venue for tourists. The current casino is the third iteration of a casino at this location. The original casino opened in 1906 and included a dance hall and refreshment stand. That casino was destroyed by the October 1921 hurricane. The second casino was built closer in-shore in 1923. It was poorly built and was torn down in the early 1930s, to be replaced by the existing building in 1935. Except for the dance band pavilion constructed on the north facade in 1950, the Gulfport Pavilion retains most of its original characteristics.

**HISTORIC CONTEXT**

**Early Settlement and Development of Gulfport, 1867-1904**

The first settlers to arrive in the area which was to become Gulfport were Captain James Barnett and his wife Rebecca, who came from Tampa in 1867 and homesteaded a tract between present-day Gulfport Boulevard and Boca Ciega Bay. Barnett, an ex-Confederate officer who had been wounded during the Civil War, built a log cabin and planted a citrus grove near the present site of York Street. Later, in 1876, he sold that property and constructed a two-story house at what is now the northwest corner of 49 Street South and 26 Avenue South.<sup>1</sup>

Other settlers came to the area during the 1870s. Joseph Torres came with his family from New Orleans in 1876 and purchased the Barnett's property on York Street. There, he constructed a general store and a pier, which extended into Boca Ciega Bay. He subdivided a portion of his land, which he sold in lots to subsequent settlers. In the same year, William B. Miranda, a steamboat captain, surveyor, and businessman arrived and built a house on what is now Lakeview Avenue. Miranda became a prominent promoter of the area and ultimately established a successful law practice and real estate agency. The original name for the settlement was taken from Miranda's middle name, Bonifacio. In 1880, a post office was established with Joseph Torres serving as the first postmaster. Early residents engaged in fishing, operating small shops, and raising crops, including citrus.<sup>2</sup>

The event that spurred the first significant settlement of Gulfport and affected the development of the entire southern half of the Florida peninsula was the Disston land purchase of 1881. After Florida gained statehood in 1845, its development depended on the ability of the state and federal governments to convey land to the public.

<sup>1</sup> "Anne H. Shoemyer, ad., Florida Statistical Abstract (Gainesville. 1986) 3; GHS, Our Story, 15, 28.

<sup>2</sup> GHS, Our Story, 15, 128; St. Petersburg Times, February 17, 1906.

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Other than land whose title was derived from a Spanish land grant, land in Florida belonged to the state or federal government. By an act of Congress in 1850, the federal government gave the state some 10,000,000 acres of swamp and overflow land for the purpose of drainage and reclamation. To manage the land and the 500,000 acres the state had received upon entering the Union in 1845, the Florida Legislature in 1851, created the Board of Trustees of the Internal Improvement Trust Fund. The Board consisted of the governor, comptroller, treasurer, secretary of agriculture, and the registrar of state lands. In 1855, the legislature set up the Florida Internal Improvement Fund, a trust in which title to state lands was vested.<sup>3</sup>

The fund became mired in debt after the Civil War. Under state law, no land could be sold until the debt was cleared. In 1881, the trustees began looking for a purchaser to buy enough state land to pay the fund's debt and permit sale of the remaining millions of acres that the state controlled. The search ended when Governor William D. Bloxom contacted his occasional fishing partner, Hamilton Disston, a wealthy saw manufacturer from Philadelphia. A shrewd investor, Disston worked a deal with the Florida Internal Improvement Fund Committee for the purchase of 4,000,000 acres of land at a cost of twenty-five cents per acre. The Disston Purchase, as it was subsequently called, enabled the state to clear its debt and then distribute large land subsidies to railroad companies, such as those of Henry Flagler and Henry Plant, which began extensive construction programs throughout the state.<sup>4</sup>

In 1883, Disston and a group of business associates, including Joseph B. Torres and William B. Miranda, discussed the possibilities of developing a new city on Boca Ciega Bay at the Bonifacio settlement. Disston, whose headquarters were at Tarpon Springs, established the Disston City Land Company in 1884. The ambitious plans for Bonifacio, which was to be renamed Disston City, called for the subdivision of more than twenty-five square miles of land into five- and ten-acre tracts, traversed by streets measuring 100 feet in width. An impressive port facility was to be constructed on Boca Ciega Bay to handle the expected large volume of shipping. The new city was advertised throughout the United States and in England. In 1884, Disston built the 26-room Waldorf Hotel overlooking the bay, where he and his brother Jacob set up their offices. He also financed a wharf, a warehouse, three stores, and several homes. In order to provide better transportation to the area, Disston attempted to persuade the Silver Springs, Ocala & Gulf Railroad and the Orange Belt Railroad to extend their lines to Disston City.<sup>5</sup>

By 1886, the settlement at Disston City had grown to about 150 people. That year the area's first newspaper, The Sea Breeze, was established by William J. McPherson, who had come from DeLand to St. Petersburg in

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<sup>3</sup> Tebeau, History of Florida, 189-191.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 287.

<sup>5</sup> GHS, Our Story, 16, 25.

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1885 before settling in Disston City. In an editorial he wrote in May 1886, McPherson described the prospects for the fledgling community of Disston City:<sup>6</sup>

We are confident from the reports received that we are just upon the dawn of a mighty boom, which will at least wake up some of the fossils that live in the flats, and re-echo even to the far North; the result of which will be to bring such crowds of emigrants, health and pleasure seekers as was never seen before on these beautiful bays.<sup>7</sup>

Much of the hope for the rapid development of Disston City centered on the continued support of the Disston company and the extension of the two railroad lines. Despite his early interest in the community, Hamilton Disston spent most of his time and money on drainage projects in central Florida and ultimately abandoned his plans to develop Disston City. The frustration that local residents felt about Disston's defection was expressed by McPherson in an editorial calling for a change in the community's name.

Who is this man H. Disston, more than an ordinary speculator? He bought up all vacant lands for a song and is selling them out at stiff prices. What has he done or is doing now to build up this town?<sup>8</sup>

A second blow to the prospects of Disston City occurred in 1888 when the Silver Springs, Ocala & Gulf Railroad chose Homosassa as its west coast terminus. That same year, Peter Demens, owner of the Orange Belt Railroad by-passed Disston City and extended his railroad to St. Petersburg, which was named in honor of his Russian birthplace. There is no better illustration of what railroad service meant to early Florida towns than a comparison of the development of the neighboring communities of Gulfport and St. Petersburg after 1888. The newly established town of St. Petersburg grew at a phenomenal rate during the ensuing two decades, growing from a population of 273 in 1890 to over 2,200 people by 1905 and to 4,127 by 1910. Meanwhile, due to its lack of rail transportation, Disston City remained relatively isolated and actually lost population during 1890s and early 1900s.<sup>9</sup>

**Veteran City and the St. Petersburg & Gulf Railway, 1905-1909**

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<sup>6</sup> Willard B. Simmonds, "The Sea Breeze, Lower Pinellus County's First Newspaper." unpublished reproduction located at the Gulfport Historical Society (Gulfport, 1985).

<sup>7</sup> The See Breeze, May 11, 1886.

<sup>8</sup> The Sea Breeze, September 15, 1886.

<sup>9</sup> Simmonds, The Sea Breeze, 1 GHS, Our Story, 148, 208; St. Petersburg Times, December 24, 1904. United States Bureau of the Census, Population (Washington, D.C., 1915) 305.

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GULFPORT, PINELLAS COUNTY, FLORIDA  
SIGNIFICANCE

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The event that rekindled interest in developing Disston City was the extension of St. Petersburg's electric railway to the settlement in 1905. The construction of the St. Petersburg electric railway system in 1904 created a new opportunity for the extension of rail service to Disston City. The St. Petersburg & Gulf Railway was built by Frank Allton Davis, a native of Philadelphia who had experience in developing similar systems in the Northeast. Davis was aided by Jacob Disston, who provided the power to run the cars when he authorized the removal of the Disston-owned electric generator at Tarpon Springs to St. Petersburg. The electric railway was completed within the city limits of St. Petersburg in September 1904. Soon after, work was begun on a line that would reach Boca Ciega Bay. The impetus behind the decision to extend the line was a desire for a better means of transportation to the developing resort community at Pass-A-Grille beach, located across the bay from Disston City. By December 1904, the St. Petersburg & Gulf Railway had reached Disston City and began operation on April 5, 1905.<sup>10</sup>

Before work on the extension of the railway began, J.F. Chase began making plans to establish a retirement community for Civil War veterans in the St. Petersburg area. Chase, a New England native, was a prominent organizer for the local chapter of the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR). Founded in 1866 by a group of Union veterans, the GAR became a major force in Republican party politics, numbering over 425,000 members at its height in 1890. Its purpose was to promote veteran affairs through political lobbying. Ultimately, the GAR succeeded in getting a national pension plan for veterans enacted. In addition, it organized annual reunions, established homes for veterans' orphans, and provided other social services for its members.<sup>11</sup>

Chase's plan for a veterans' retirement community was not unique. A successful GAR community of over 5,000 had previously been established at Fitzgerald, Georgia, and a similar enterprise was founded at St. Cloud, Florida, in the early 1890s. Chase believed that the climate and beauty of the St. Petersburg area was more desirable than other GAR communities and would attract substantial numbers of veterans. He announced his plans for the community, which was to be called Veteran City, in September 1904. The St. Petersburg Times described the prospects for the venture:

Veteran City in the healthiest, most genial spot in the world will be a haven of peace, rest, and comfort that will add another span, and one filled with happiness and content, to the lives of the old veterans who will gather there.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> GHS Our Story, 17; St. Petersburg Times, October 1, November 26, December 17, 1904.

<sup>11</sup> St. Petersburg Times, September 10, 1904, April 15, 1905; Norman A. Graebner, Gilbert C. Fitts, and Philip, L. White, A History of the American People, 2 vols. (New York, 1975) 2:513, 519; Patricia L. Faust, ed., Historical Times Illustrated Encyclopedia of the Civil War (New York, 1986) 317-318.

<sup>12</sup> St. Petersburg Times, September 10 and 24, 1904.

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It was the availability of undeveloped land and the soon to be completed extension of the St. Petersburg & Gulf Railroad that led Chase to locate his community at Disston City. Financial backing for the venture came from Frank Davis' St. Petersburg Investment Company, developers of the electric railway, and Hamilton Disston's Lake Butler Villa Company, which was based in Tarpon Springs. Together, the firms platted a subdivision called Veteran City. Veteran City consisted of twenty-four blocks, seven of which were set aside for parks. There were a total of 212 building lots on the remaining seventeen blocks. The west boundary of the subdivision fronted on the tracks of the electric railway. Fifty-foot-wide streets, now East and West Beach Boulevard, were planned to skirt the parks, and a setback of thirty feet, to allow for sidewalks and tree planting, from the roads was established, for home construction. With the exception of the railway tracks, which have since been removed, much of that early town plan is still in evidence today.<sup>13</sup>

The dedication of Veteran City was part of the activities scheduled for a GAR encampment held at St. Petersburg in April 1905. Participants were transported to the area on the newly opened electric railway and treated to refreshments. Noted local orator Eli Gunby delivered the keynote address and outlined the goals of the new village:

It is the purpose to make this a city where (veterans) may temporarily abide and build their cottages or palaces - where they may remain in a climate the best on earth - where many a veteran now travelling in the sunset path to the gates of the golden west may find a home until he is prepared to enter another mansion already prepared and to find a welcome from those who are gone before.<sup>14</sup>

First Casino

Soon after the dedication, the developers of Veteran City began a civic improvement program that was designed to attract new residents to the area. Immediate attention was given to clearing land for parks, home sites, and roads. In addition, plans were made for the construction of a new city pier and casino. The casino was to be the terminus for the electric railway line trolley (Photo 17) from St. Petersburg, allowing passengers to disembark from the trolley to wait for the ferry to the town of Pass-a-Grille. The original casino opened in 1906 and included a dance hall and refreshment stand. The pier was constructed of wood and extended 800 feet into Boca Ciega Bay (Photos 18-19). Tracks for the electric railway line were constructed on the pier to allow passengers to step from the trolley directly onto awaiting steamboats. The casino was a two-story wood frame building located at the end of the pier. It measured 102 feet long by seventy-five feet wide. The first floor contained a stage for concerts and other entertainments and seating for over 500 persons. A soda fountain provided guests with refreshments and moving picture, slot machines, billiard, and pinball machines were placed throughout for entertainment. The second floor consisted of an open air pavilion that allowed visitors a

<sup>13</sup> St. Petersburg Times, March 4, 1905, November 22, 1906; Pinellas County Plat Book H4, p. 17.

<sup>14</sup> St. Petersburg Times, April 15, 1905.

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scenic view of the bay and cool breezes from the gulf. The casino was completed and opened to the public in April 1906.<sup>15</sup> The south side of the casino had docks for excursion passengers, as well as mail and freight boats. Opened to the public in April 1906, the casino had been built as a stopover, but it soon became an attraction in itself and a center of activity. Bands played there, civic get-togethers were held, and it was the site of services for the First United Methodist Church.

**Gulfport through World War I, 1910-1919**

Despite improvements and a significant amount of national advertising, there was no immediate rush to purchase property and construct houses in Veteran City. By 1910, it remained a small, sparsely populated village. The impetus provided by private investment for developing the area had dissipated. In an effort to finance continued improvement of the community through taxation, local residents voted to incorporate the community as a town. The vote to move toward incorporation was made at a public meeting held at the casino on August 24, 1910. It was also decided at that meeting that the name of the town be changed from Veteran City to Gulfport. The official meeting for incorporation was held on October 12th. At that point the community contained only thirty-eight citizens eligible to vote, of whom thirty turned out for the meeting. E.E. Wintersgill, a real estate agent, was elected the town's first mayor. Other elected officials included S.J. Webb, town clerk; John C. White, marshal; and A.C. Stefanski, H.C. Slauter, Henry Withers, Joshua White, and I.M. Wintersgill councilmen.<sup>16</sup>

The new town of Gulfport consisted of a sprawling territory eight miles square, running from the western boundary of St. Petersburg to Boca Ciega Bay. The large area was chosen in order to take in as many residents and as much property as possible to provide a decent tax base for the town. There was a certain degree of opposition to this method of gerrymandering, as the following excerpt from an editorial in the St. Petersburg Times attests:

Gulfport is perhaps the largest town in Florida, territorially speaking, and for population per square mile it is undoubtedly the largest on earth...the taking in of large areas of valuable lands that can never receive any benefits of the corporation whatsoever and are taken only to be taxed, being nothing more or less than a hold-up....<sup>17</sup>

During the 1910s Gulfport began to take its form. Although hampered by a modest tax base, the Town Council began to fund infrastructure improvements that ultimately led to the clearing of roads and the establishment of gas, water, and sewer services. The first Town Hall was erected in 1913 at a cost of \$1,260. In September 1914

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<sup>15</sup> St. Petersburg Times, May 27, 1905, April 14, 1906; GHS, Our Story, 262.

<sup>16</sup> St. Petersburg Times, August 25, 1910.

<sup>17</sup> St. Petersburg Times, October 14, 1910.

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SIGNIFICANCE

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the Tampa & Gulf Coast Railroad (T&GC) was opened, providing Gulfport with rail transportation directly to Tampa. Although the railroad, did not have an impact on the development of the city, it provided an additional transportation route and also facilitated the delivery of building materials. In 1917 the T&GC became part of the extensive Seaboard Airline system, which provided direct connections with most of the major cities in Florida.<sup>18</sup>

**Gulfport During the Great Florida Land Boom, 1920-1928**

During the years immediately following incorporation a number of subdivisions were platted and developed. Most buildings constructed prior to World War I were either one or two stories in height and had vernacular or Bungalow style designs.<sup>19</sup> The United States' entrance into World War I in 1917 dampened development throughout the state as Americans turned their attention to the war effort. Lot purchases in the town lay dormant until the mid-1920s when Gulfport, like much of the rest of the state, experienced its most significant period of historic development.<sup>20</sup>

It is difficult to exaggerate the speculative proportions of the boom that erupted in the mid-1920s. Miami and Palm Beach are generally regarded as the scenes of the most frenzied activity, but the Tampa-St. Petersburg area ranked a close second. St. Petersburg's boom began in earnest in 1923. The St. Petersburg Times reported in November of that year that a record 237 tourists on two trains had entered the town in a single day. That same month it was reported that twenty- three municipalities in Florida had already exceeded their previous year's total in building permits issued and that the amount spent on construction projects throughout the state was \$10,000,000 dollars ahead of the figure established in 1922. By December 1924 it was estimated that twenty thousand people entered Florida each day. The previous fall, the Florida Legislature issued an open invitation to wealthy investors with approval of a constitutional amendment prohibiting both income and inheritance taxes. The resulting capital influx accelerated an already well-developed surge of land purchasing. In early 1925 some 25 trains daily were arriving at Jacksonville, where visitors could catch connecting trains to almost anywhere in the state.<sup>21</sup>

Gulfport's development during the period followed, though on a much smaller scale, the course of the larger cities in the state. At the onset of the boom in 1923 the town's population was an estimated 300. The developed area of Gulfport extended from 15th Avenue South to the bay and from 49th Street South to 58th Street South. There were approximately 185 buildings, the majority of which were wood frame dwellings, located within that area. Also present were the Gulfport City Hall, Gulfport Public School, First Presbyterian

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<sup>18</sup> GHS Our Story, 75, 87, 132, 170, 253.

<sup>19</sup> Pinellas County Plat Book H6, p. 52, PB 1, p. 25, PB 3, 11 and 24.

<sup>20</sup> GHS, Our Story, 160, 164, 214.

<sup>21</sup> Tebeau, History of Florida, 377; St. Petersburg Times, November 14 and 17, 1923; (Sebring.) Highlands American, March 3, 1925.

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GULFPORT, PINELLAS COUNTY, FLORIDA  
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Church, Southern Methodist Church, Bayview Hotel, Gulfport Inn, a post office, and several fish houses and stores.<sup>22</sup>

During the boom, Gulfport's population increased to about 1000 in 1928. In the mid-1920s dozens of new subdivisions were platted, tripling the size of the town to its present configuration. Approximately 300 buildings were constructed in the town during the boom, many of which exhibited Mediterranean Revival style architecture. Between 1924 and 1927 the local government issued bonds totalling over \$1,250,000 for road construction and paving. That effort to accommodate the ever-increasing number of automobiles in the town produced nearly twenty-four miles of brick paved streets.<sup>23</sup>

Just as the height of the real estate boom was being reached, there were signs that the boom, which many thought would last indefinitely, was in trouble. Over-speculation in real estate throughout Florida had created a financial house of cards. Land changed hands so rapidly that many investors found their properties heavily mortgaged and themselves with little cash. In late-summer of 1925, the Florida East Coast Railway, overloaded by the vast amount of building materials being shipped to South Florida, declared a freight embargo. Northern newspapers began to run articles about corrupt speculation practices and urged their customers not to be taken in by the promise of easy fortunes through Florida real estate. A devastating hurricane hit South Florida in September 1926, halting development there.<sup>24</sup>

### **The Great Depression to World War II, 1929-1941**

The collapse of the Florida Boom marked a close to a significant chapter in the historical development of Gulfport and communities throughout the state. The abrupt end of the land boom caught many investors in Gulfport by surprise. Believing that the boom would last indefinitely, many found themselves overextended on their private loans and mortgages. New development was brought to a virtual halt. Property owners in increasing number lost their land and homes to foreclosure. Summing up Gulfport's situation after the collapse of the boom, the St. Petersburg Times reported that it had left Gulfport "with some 25 miles of paved streets, many proposed and half waterfront shattered dreams and shattered credit."<sup>25</sup> The onset of the Great Depression, in 1929, further exacerbated the economic problems of Gulfport. Many of the residents who had located there during the real estate boom moved away, resulting in a decline in population from a high of over 1,000 at the height of the boom to 851 in 1930. The town's delinquent tax rolls grew and resulted in an inability to pay its

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<sup>22</sup> Sanborn Map Company, Fire Insurance Atop of Gulfport, Pinellas County, Florida (New York, 1923 and 1928).

<sup>23</sup> Sanborn. Fire insurance Map (New York, 1928); GHS, Our Story, 132, 135.

<sup>24</sup> Merlin O. Cox and Junius E. DoveII, Florida From Secession to the Space Age (St. Petersburg, FL., 1974).

<sup>25</sup> Merlin G. Cox and Junius E. Dovell, Florida From Secession to the Space Age (St. Petersburg, FL: 1974) 160-162.

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bonded indebtedness and a poor credit rating. The town was forced to restructure the loans that went to pay for the improvements of the 1920s.<sup>26</sup>

By the second half of the 1930s the local economy was beginning to show signs of recovery. With federal aid from New Deal programs and agencies such as the Federal Housing Authority (FHA), prospective homeowners could borrow guaranteed money at low interest rates. Those programs helped to spark a modest amount of residential construction. The city took steps to provide additional services by installing a comprehensive drainage system, trash incinerators and water service, which was piped in from St. Petersburg.

By mid-decade Gulfport had regained the population it lost as a result of the collapse of the land boom, and in 1940 the total number of residents was 1,581.<sup>27</sup> The trolley, which made its last run in 1948, was never physically connected to the Casino. Like its predecessors, this third Casino became an intrinsic part of the social fabric of the community (Photo 22). Casino number three has been altered, and subsequently expanded through the years. Most noticeably, a band shell was added to the front of the building and the once-grand entrance was split into two entrance doors (Photo 23).

**STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE**

In 1934, the Federal Emergency Relief Administration and the local Civil Works Administration of Gulfport pooled resources to construct a new casino. The original casino had been destroyed by a hurricane in 1921. It was replaced in 1923 with a structure of inferior quality, built on stilts (Photo 20). Nevertheless, this second casino was as popular as its predecessor. An orchestra called the Merry Makers started playing there in 1926 and continued long beyond the life of this building into the years of the third and final casino. Camille Thompson was the bandleader, and she was quoted as remembering that people wondered if the floor would hold up under all the dancing feet.

The City Council had approved two projects simultaneously, at a total budget of \$38,000.00. Dredging a channel at Clam Bayou would cost \$22,000.00, and the Casino would be built for \$16,000.00. The third and current version of the casino was moved over land with docks to connect to the ferry service (Photo 21). A sea wall was built around the structure and filled with sand to protect the piers. Wooden walkways on stilts originally provided access to the side entrances. Eventually, fill was used to raise the grade around the casino to its present floor level and new walkways with railings were constructed on the sides of the building.

The third and present casino was dedicated in December 1935. The new building continues to feature one of the finest dance floors in Florida, perhaps in the entire South. It is made of solid maple and was never waxed;

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<sup>26</sup> GHS, *Our Story*, 133-134.

<sup>27</sup> *St. Petersburg Times*, November 11, 1936; GHS, *Our Story*, 263, 337.

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SIGNIFICANCE

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instead, it was treated with commercial paraffin and yellow cornmeal to create a perfect surface on which dancers could glide but not slip. The reputation of this floor extended far beyond the immediate area, as people came from great distances to enjoy its qualities.

Historic buildings convey a sense of place to a community, contributing to a strong sense of identity. The historic buildings associated with Gulfport have developed a distinctive and familiar character over a long period of time, but none more so than the Gulfport Casino. The casino is the anchor for the Waterfront Redevelopment District and remains central to community activities. The casino is easily distinguishable upon entering the business corridor of the Waterfront District as it sits at the waterfront terminus of Beach Boulevard.

Gulfport Casino has been, for nearly 80 years the site of dancing, boxing, wrestling, church services, card parties, bingo, political speeches, concerts and school functions. From its humble beginnings, the Gulfport Casino remains a connection to and reminder of Gulfport's past, its present and its future.

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GULFPORT, PINELLAS COUNTY, FLORIDA  
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GULFPORT CASINO  
GULFPORT, PINELLAS COUNTY, FLORIDA  
GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

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**Verbal Boundary Description**

Parcel No. 33-31-16-09612-000-0020, Township 31, Section 33, Range 16, Subdivision 09612, Block 000, Lot 0020

BOCA CEIGA PARK WATER LOTS 2 TO 7 INCL & FILLED LAND

The general boundaries of the property is shown by the dashed line on the accompanying site and floor plans map.

**Boundary Justification**

The above property description encompasses all of the historic resources associated with the Gulfport Casino.

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GULFPORT, PINELLAS COUNTY, FLORIDA  
LIST OF PHOTOGRAPHS

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**LIST OF PHOTOGRAPHS**

1. Gulfport Casino
2. 5500 Shore Boulevard, Gulfport (Pinellas County), Florida
3. Community Development Director
4. 2013
5. Community Development, City of Gulfport
6. Main (North) Facade, Looking Southeast
7. Photo 1 of 23

**Numbers 1-5 are the same for the remaining photographs, except where indicated.**

6. Main (North) Facade, Looking Southeast
7. Photo 2 of 23

6. West and South Elevations, Looking Northease
7. Photo 3 of 23

6. West Elevation, Looking Southeast
7. Photo 4 of 23

6. West Elevation, Looking Northeast
7. Photo 5 of 23

6. East Elevation, Looking Southwest
7. Photo 6 of 23

6. South and East Elevations, Looking Northwestr
7. Photo 7 of 23

6. East Elevation, Looking West
7. Photo 8 of 23

6. South Elevation, Looking North
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6. South Elevation, Looking Northwest
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6. Interior of Ballroom, Looking North toward Band Shell  
7. Photo 11 of 23

6. Interior of Ballroom, Looking Northeast  
7. Photo 12 of 23

6. Interior of Ballroom Looking Northwest  
7. Photo 13 of 23

6. Interior of Ballroom, Looking Southeast  
7. Photo 14 of 23

6. Interior of Ballroom Looking North toward Band Shell  
7. Photo 15 of 23

6. Interior of Ballroom, Looking South toward Rear of Building  
7. Photo 16 of 23

**HISTORIC PHOTOS (Not shown on site map)**

3. Photographer Unknown  
4. 1905  
5. Gulfport Historical Museum, City of Gulfport  
6. Photo of Trolley, View Unknown  
7. Photo 17 of 23

3. Photographer Unknown  
4. 1905  
5. Gulfport Historical Museum, City of Gulfport  
6. Photo of First Casino, South Elevation, Looking North  
7. Photo 18 of 23

3. Photographer Unknown  
4. 1905  
5. Gulfport Historical Museum, City of Gulfport  
6. Photo of First Casino, Looking Southeast toward End of Pier  
7. Photo 19 of 23

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3. Photographer Unknown

4. 1921

5. Gulfport Historical Museum, City of Gulfport

6. Photo of Second Casino, Main (North) Facade and West Elevation, Looking Southeast

7. Photo 20 of 23

3. Photographer Unknown

4. 1935

5. Gulfport Historical Museum, City of Gulfport

6. Main (North) Facade, Looking Southeast

7. Photo 21 of 23

3. Photographer Unknown

4. c. 1935

5. Florida Memory Collection, State Archives of Florida

6. Postcard, Image No. PC3905, Main (North) Facade, Looking Southeast

7. Photo 22 of 23

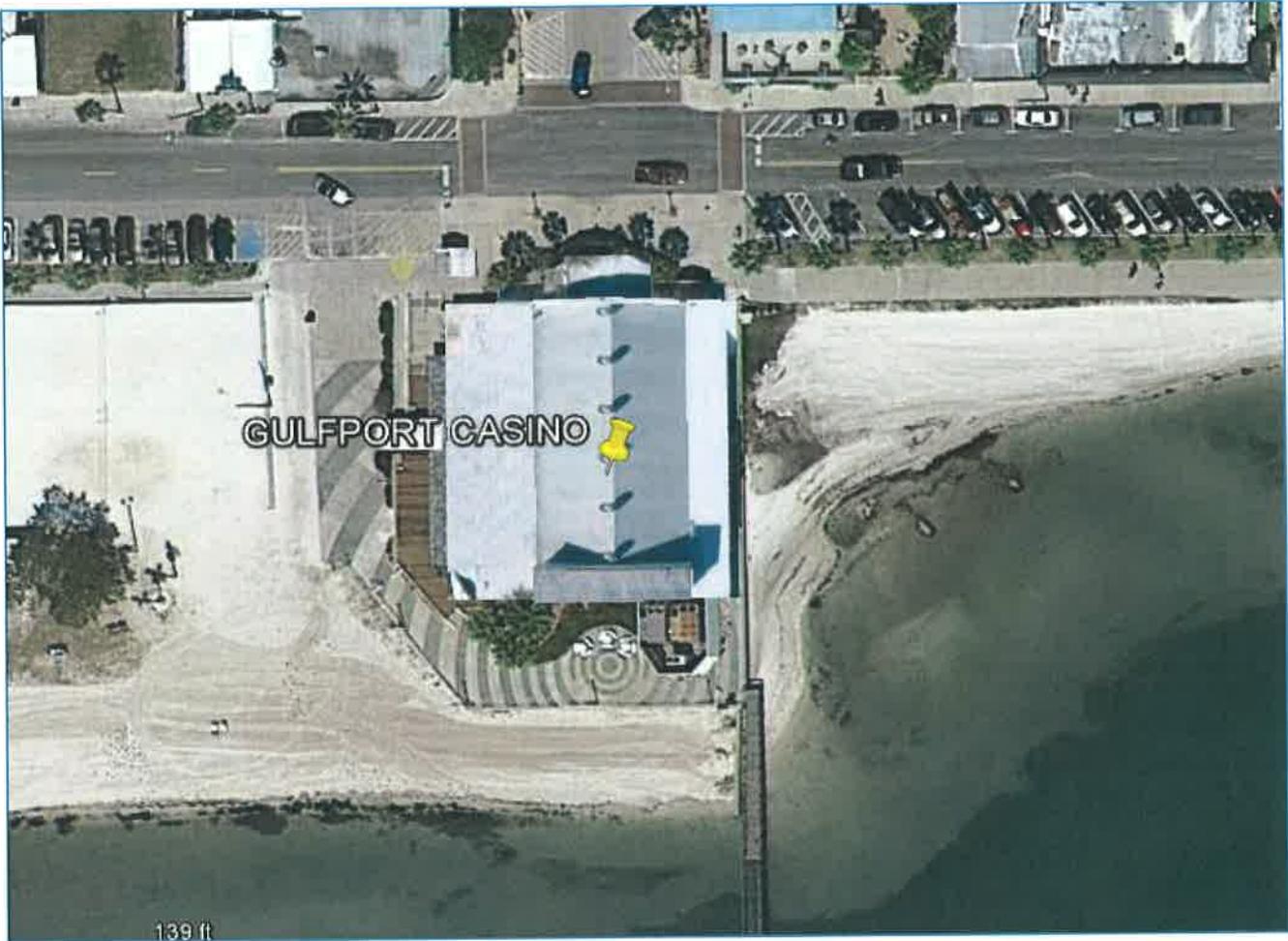
3. Photographer Unknown

4. 1950

5. Gulfport Historical Museum, City of Gulfport

6. Main (North) Facade, Looking Southwest.

7. Photo 23 of 23



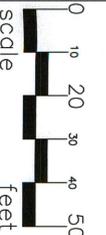
**GULFPORT CASINO**  
**5500 SHORE BOULEVARD**  
**GULFPORT (PINELLAS COUNTY), FLORIDA**

LATITUDE: 27.737483°  
LONGITUDE: -82.707841°

UTM REFERENCES

<u>Zone</u>	<u>Easting</u>	<u>Northing</u>
17	331661	3069292

GULFPORT CASINO  
 5500 SHORE BOULEVARD  
 GULFPORT (PINELLAS COUNTY), FLORIDA



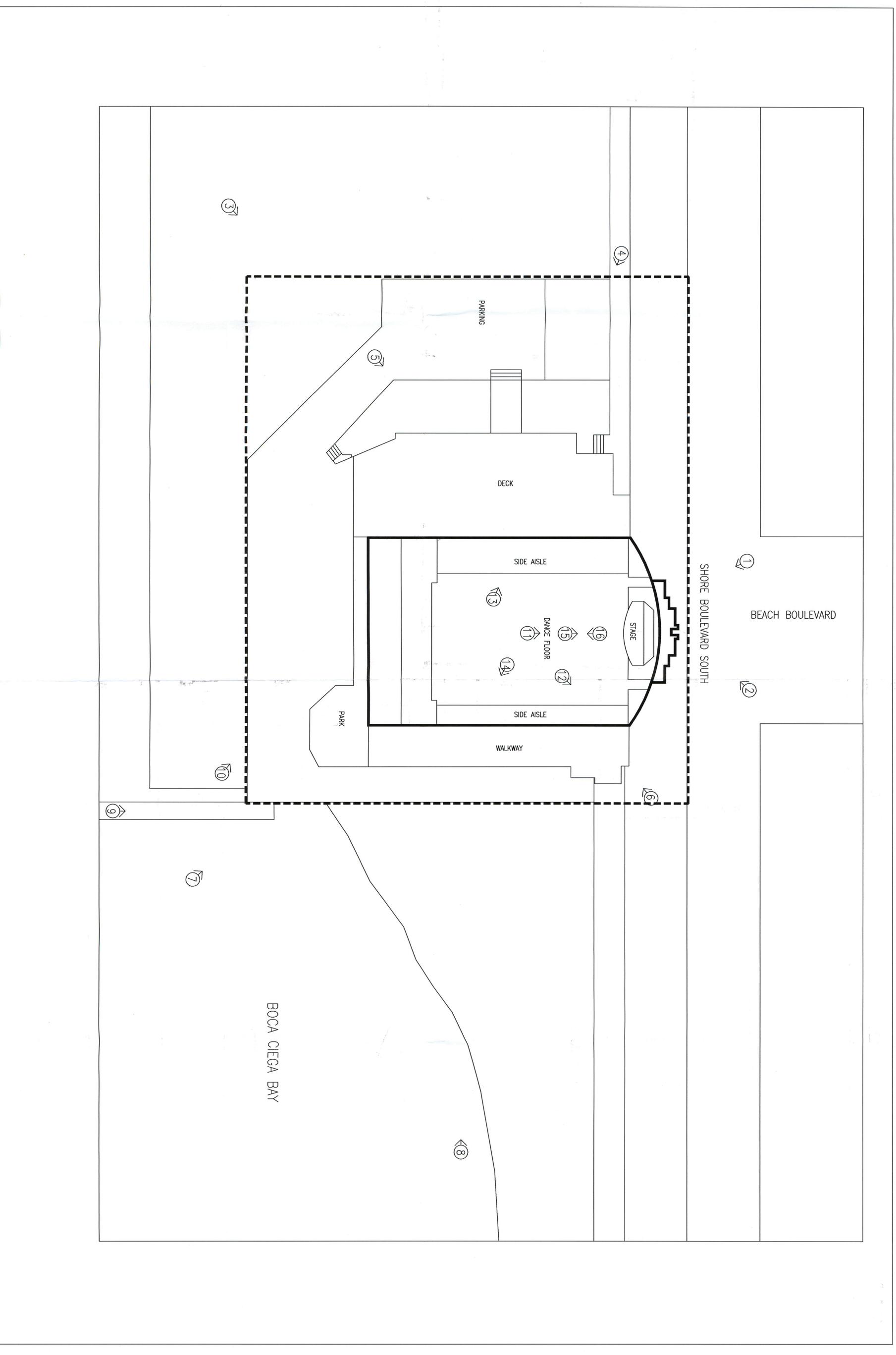
Frederick J. Metcalf, AICP  
 Director of Community Development  
 City of Gulfport  
 2401 53rd Street South  
 Gulfport, Florida 33707  
 e-mail: fmetcalf@mygulfport.us Phone: (727) 893-1095

DRAWN BY: W. Carl Silver  
 DRAWING DATE: MARCH 2013

MAP REVIEWED BY: CARL SILVER  
 FLORIDA BUREAU OF HISTORIC PRESERVATION  
 P.O. BOX 1000  
 500 SOUTH BRONOUGH STREET  
 TALLAHASSEE, FLORIDA 32399-0250  
 PHONE NUMBER: (904) 245-5533  
 TELEPHONE NUMBER: (904) 245-5437  
 FAX NUMBER: (904) 245-5437

DRAWING NUMBER: N/A  
 ORIGINAL SURVEY MAP PROVIDED BY: Frederick J. Metcalf, AICP  
 SHEET NO. 1 OF 1  
 2401 53rd Street South, Gulfport, Florida 33707  
 Phone: (727) 893-1095

HISTORIC BOUNDARY  
 PHOTO NUMBERS  
 SITE & FLOOR PLAN



# GULFPORT CASINO



5500  
GULFPORT CASINO  
PUBLIC PARKING  
RENT THE BALLROOM  
FOR YOUR WEDDING  
OR SPECIAL EVENT  
813-1070

NO SMOKING  
NO ALCOHOL  
NO GAMING  
NO DRUGS

# GULFPORT CASINO

5500  
GULFPORT CASINO  
PUBLIC PARKING  
BEAT THE HALLROOM  
FOR YOUR WEDDING  
OR SOCIAL EVENT  
850-1070













*Welcome to*  
**GULFPORT**







*Welcome to*  
**GULFPORT**



WELCOME





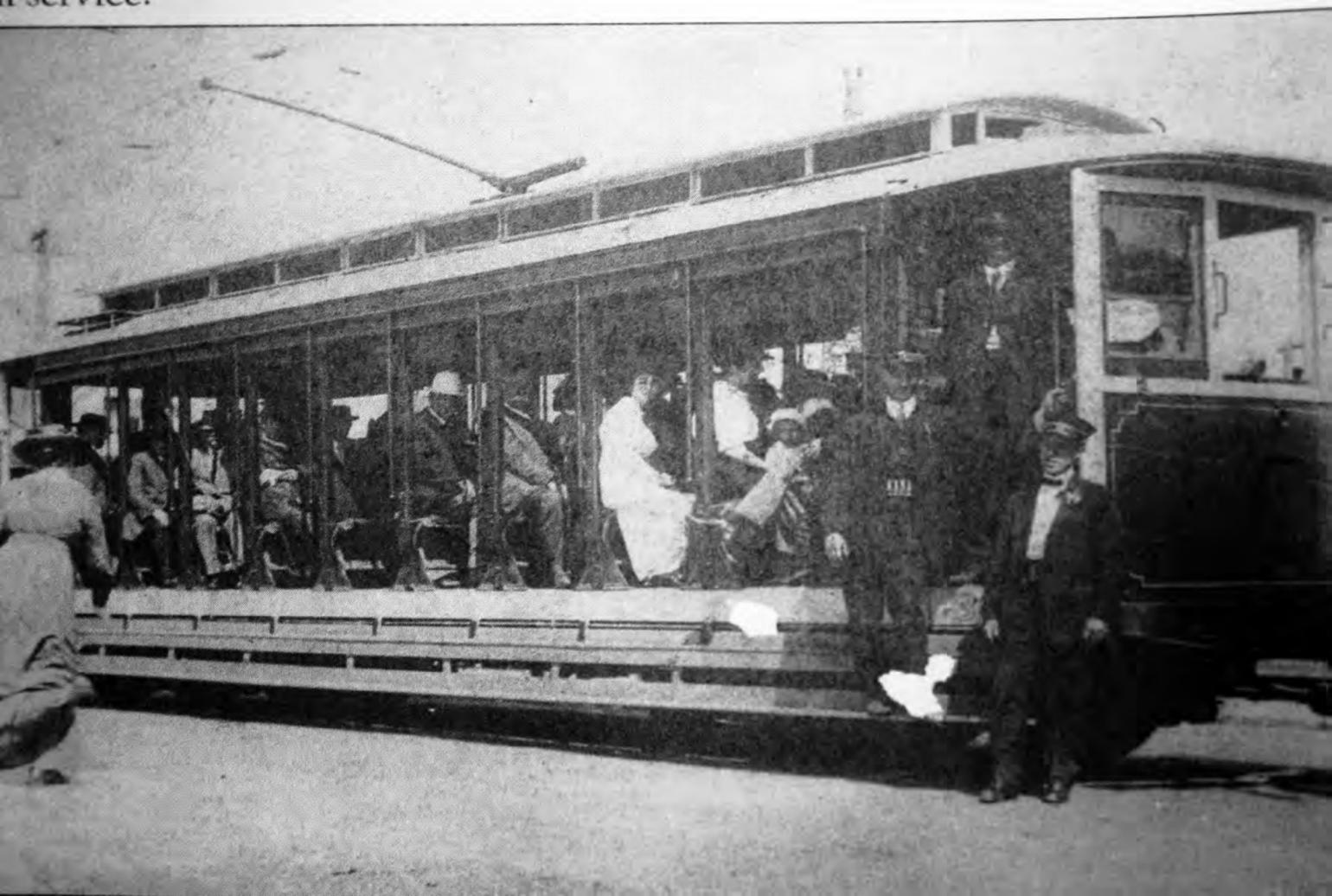








service.



*Vetran City, Florida. The Casino, View on Dock.*



*Vetran City, Florida. Sulf Casino Dock.*

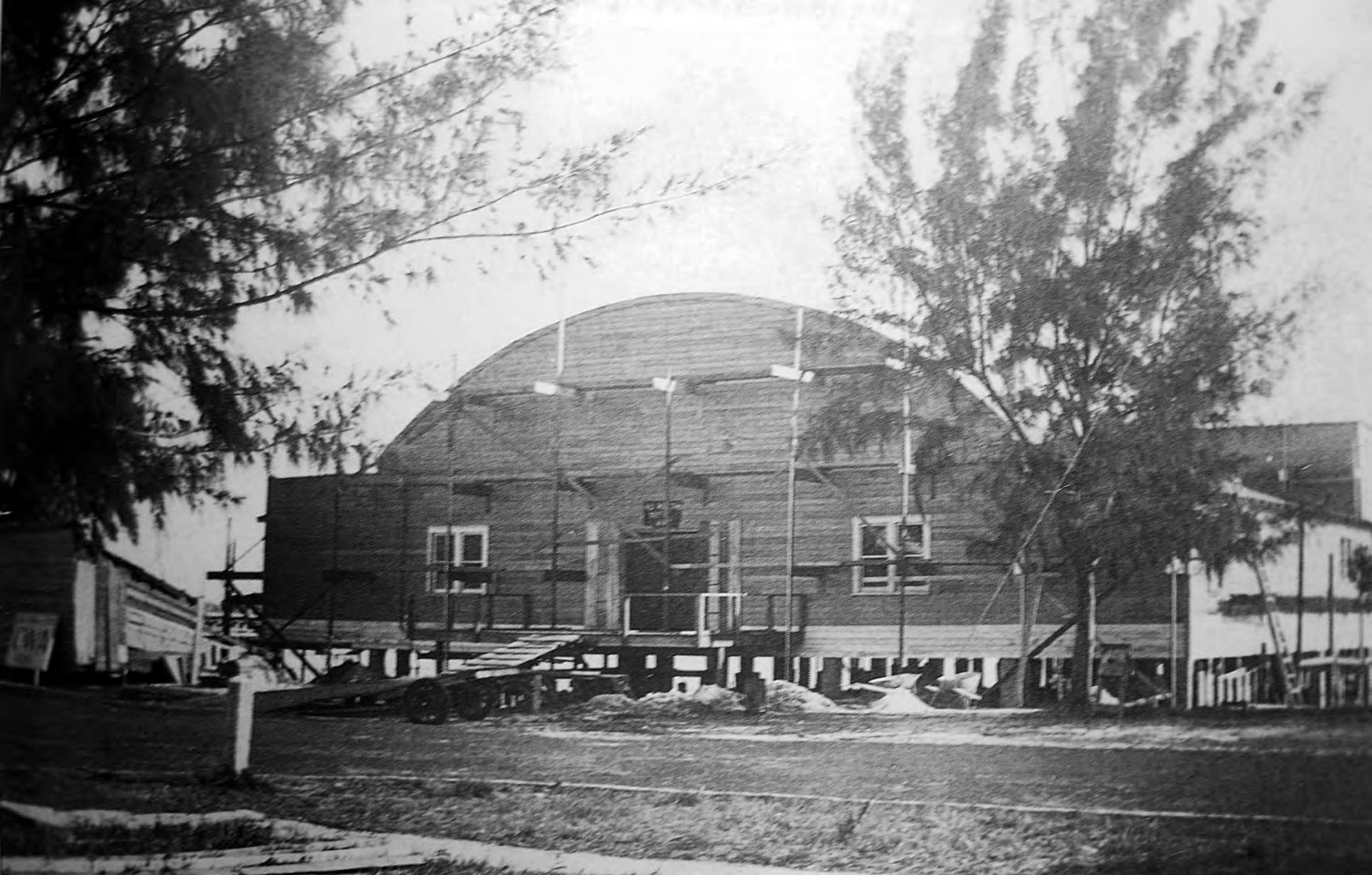




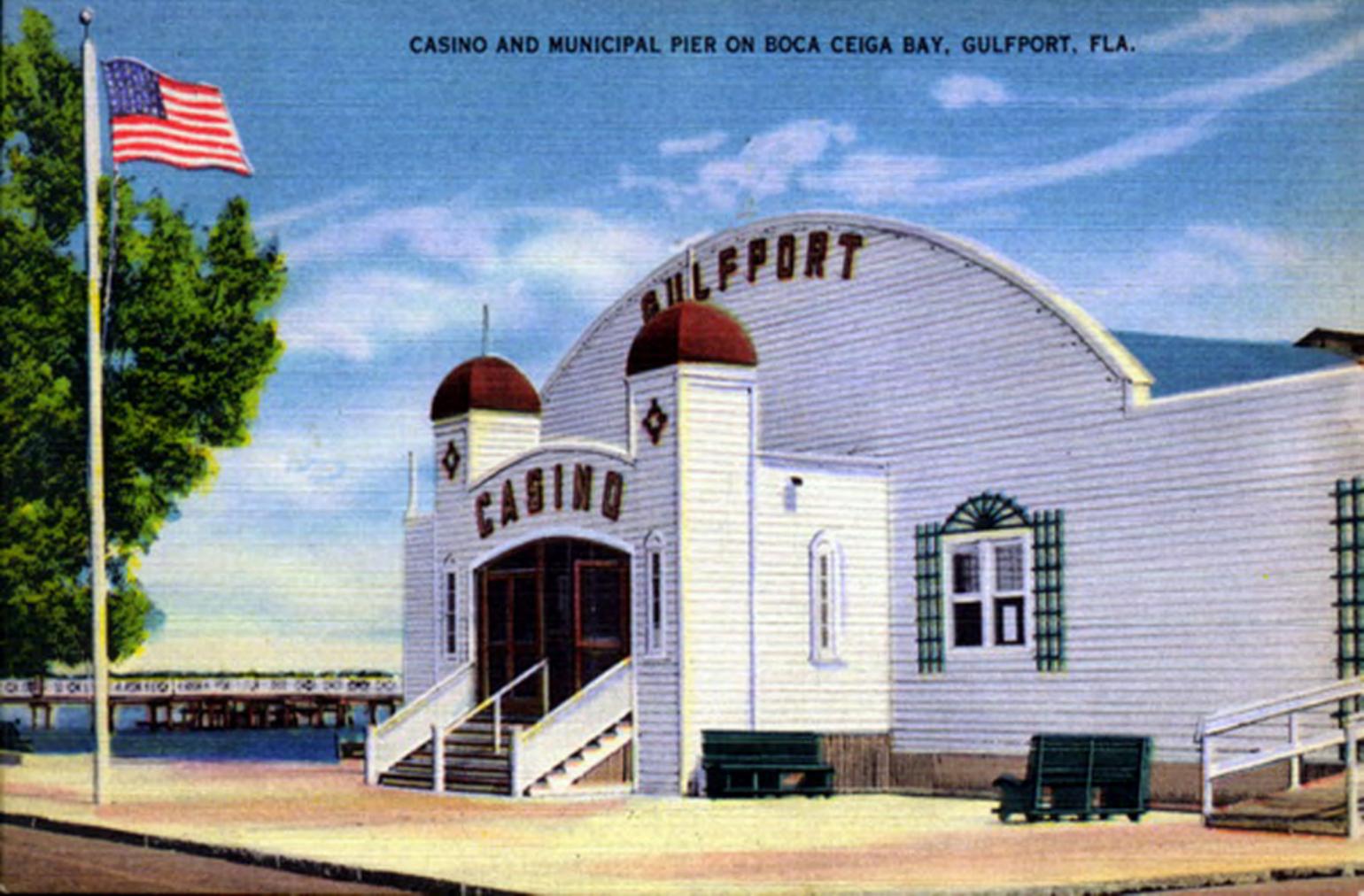
GULFPORT  
CASINO  
LIDGE DINNERS  
DANCING PARTIES

THE THORNE STUDIO

~ THE NEW CASINO AT GULFPORT THE PHAS-A-GILLS BOATS ARE THE THIS DOCK ~ PHOTO BY THORNE



CASINO AND MUNICIPAL PIER ON BOCA CEIGA BAY, GULFPORT, FLA.



GULFPORT  
CASINO

