

Section 9. Corridor Story

Typically Floridian, combining all the expected elements of Florida sun, wide water vistas, sunsets, and tropical vegetation, that's the Courtney Campbell Scenic Highway. But, our Causeway is really much more than that.

Sunrise on the Causeway... the beginning

In 1528, the Spanish explorer Panfilo de Narvaez is believed to have landed somewhere on the Pinellas peninsula followed by Hernando DeSoto in 1529. Both men searched for the "Fountain of Youth," but instead found the beauty of the wetlands and the shore of Old Tampa Bay – the west anchor of the Courtney Campbell Causeway.

The Springs of the Holy Spirit, named by deSoto when he discovered the Espiritu Santo Springs, still exist at the Safety Harbor Resort and Spa. It was another 300 years before Odet Philippe established the first permanent settlement, other than native Indians, on the Pinellas peninsula north of the current causeway. Phillippe is credited with introducing citrus to the area, which in later years, was destined to become the leading agricultural product of Pinellas County. Shortly after Phillippe's settlement of Safety Harbor, the historical Bayview area, just south of the Causeway on the Pinellas side, was settled.

Today, the historic Bayview area is still home to original settlement homes and beautiful views of Old Tampa Bay. Cooper's Point is a preservation area, maintaining much of the northwest portion of the causeway as it was in Phillippe's day. Prior to the construction of the Causeway, Pinellas County was not much more than wetlands, swamps and eventually citrus groves – now, it is a bustling, urban county.

In the late 1920s, Ben T. Davis, a direct descendent of President Jefferson Davis of the Confederacy, wanted to shorten the journey between Clearwater and Tampa. Although the Gandy Bridge had been built between St. Petersburg and Tampa, there was no direct connection between central Pinellas County and Tampa.

From 1927 to 1934, Captain Davis (formerly a Steamboat Captain) worked on the Causeway when his company had no other dredging work to do. The Causeway cost \$900,000 to build (including the two bridges since one was demolished by a hurricane). It opened on June 28, 1934 with a 25-cent toll for a car and driver. The Davis Causeway was the longest over-water fill across an open body of water in the country. In 1944, as part of the war effort, the federal government seized control, paid \$1,085,861 for the road and transferred ownership to the State of Florida. In 1948, it was renamed the Courtney W. Campbell Causeway after the Florida Road Board member and US Congressman (and Clearwater Beach resident). This recognition came because of his work effecting major repairs and beautification, including his much-copied wayside park system.

Renaming the road created the means for a converted parkway with extensive landscaping including the native vegetation that grows today. Now, more than 50,000 commuters traverse the Causeway daily.

Bright Florida Days...

Although the dredging and filling of the Causeway substantially changed the tidal water movements within the bay, water recreation activities remain a large part of the Causeway today. The water quality in the Safety Harbor area deteriorated and the salinity of the area north of the Causeway decreased affecting marine life. Today's environmental standards would not allow such a construction project – making the Causeway itself a piece of history.

Picnic shelters, tables and rest areas along the Causeway reflect the casual lifestyle of visitors to mid-1900's parkways. A public boat ramp on the north side of the Causeway affords opportunities for fishing, sightseeing or water skiing in Tampa Bay. The Ben T. Davis Municipal Beach rests on the eastern (Tampa) border of the Causeway and an unnamed beach owned by the FDOT borders the west end of the Causeway.

Access roads along the north and south side of the Causeway provide a linear pedestrian walkway and bike trail. Small bridges allow for fisherman to take advantage of the multitude of flounder, redfish, sheepshead, snook, and spotted seatrout in the bay.

Clearwater's Visitor Information Center not only helps navigate visitors from Tampa to Clearwater Beach, but will provide a means for distributing educational material about the Scenic Corridor.

Natural beauty and glowing sunsets...

The unique construction project that created the Causeway also created an ecosystem, limiting access to natural predators and creating an environmental sanctuary for many bird species.

Tampa Bay is Florida's largest open water estuary, stretching 398 square miles at high tide. Saltwater from the sea and fresh water from rivers and uplands mix, create nurseries for young fish, shrimp and crabs.

The north shoreline is a paradise for birds and the Causeway acts as a form of barrier (acting as a coastal island) from predators. Birds nesting in the protected areas include certain herons and egrets, which have been designated Species of Special Concern (SSC) by the State. In addition, the endangered West Indian Manatee (federally listed) also roams the waters around the Causeway, the western half of which is part of the Pinellas County Aquatic Preserve as designated by the Florida Department of Environmental Protection. This Preserve and the management practices of this state road's lengthy beaches have promoted growth of flora such as Spartina "marsh grass," mangrove trees, seagrasses and various other aquatic plants necessary to attract smaller organisms that balance out the food chain.

Audubon Scientists have recently spotted dozens of bird nests within the Conservation Easement Site. In order of prevalence, the Tri-colored heron, Snowy egret, and little blue heron, all of which are SSC-listed by Florida, frequent the site. Other rookery inhabitant (for a total of 78 pairs) are the Great Blue heron, Great egret, American Oystercatcher

and Yellow-crowned night-heron, the latter of which has been a designated colony occupying a breeding site as far back as 1986.

As the sun sets in the Bay area, commuters see the beauty of nature and fun joined together in this one unique corridor. The Courtney Campbell Scenic Highway combines a rich ecological and engineering history with a modern recreation and environmental wonder. The blend of Indian settlers, Spanish adventurers, turn-of-the-century entrepreneurs and modern-day commuters and sportsmen write the story of the Courtney Campbell Scenic Highway.