

Warm Mineral Springs: Attracting humans for 10,000 years



PHOTOS PROVIDED

Bathing in the springs was a popular pastime long before the city of North Port was even incorporated.

North Port is now considering how to use this historic asset

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WARM MINERAL SPRINGS — It is questionable whether Warm Mineral Springs is the legendary Fountain of Youth that Juan Ponce de León supposedly sought more than five centuries ago.

The springs, near North Port, has, for the better part of a century, drawn underwater archeologists in pursuit of its historical treasures as well as tens of thousands of tourists from around the world seeking its reportedly healing powers.

“The site represents immense archaeological, recreational, geological and historical value,” said Lorrie Muldowney, past president of the Sarasota Alliance for Historic Preservation. “There is really no other place like it in the world.”

The spring itself is located on 83 acres of undeveloped land, adjacent to U.S. 41 South in the city of North Port. The circular, hour-glass-shaped sinkhole measures 236 feet across and 230 feet deep.

The primary source of inflowing fresh water is from a vent located about 207 feet below the surface, discharging an estimated 20 million gallons of highly mineralized water per day, at a temperature of 86 degrees Fahrenheit.

About five to seven million gallons of that water overflow each day into nearby waterways.

During the Pleistocene period that existed until about 12,000 years ago, the water table in the springs was much lower, exposing small caverns in the walls of the sinkhole.

Stalactites and Stalagmites formed in these caverns, indicating they were exposed to the elements for a considerable length of time, allowing for their formation.

THE ARRIVAL OF THE SCIENTISTS

By the 1950s, retired Air Force Lt. Col. William Royal and other scuba divers such as the famed ichthyologist Eugenia Clark began diving in the spring and discovering numerous artifacts and the human remains of at least seven indigenous people.

Royal discovered the skull of one Ice Age resident that still contained brain material. Carbon dating of this material and other matter collected dated to about 10,000 years ago, making the springs the earliest known evidence of human occupation in Florida.

Divers also found the bones of ancient animals such as saber-toothed cats, mammoths, and a giant ground sloth.

Florida was a much different place 12,000 years ago, nearly twice the size it is today with a climate that was cooler and more arid. The water level in the springs was nearly a hundred feet deeper than it is today, thereby allowing for the exposure of small caverns along its sides that contained the preserved remains of humans and their primitive tools.

The fact that the water in the springs is devoid of oxygen and is highly mineralized allowed for the preservation of the fossils and artifacts.

A smaller spring, known as Little Salt Spring, is located about a mile east of its counterpart and has, over the years, offered up similar artifacts and human remains.

The spring, and the 110 acres surrounding it, were deeded to the University of Miami in 1982 for research purposes. In 1986, divers discovered a 7,000-year-old skull there that also contained DNA material.

SPA, BATHHOUSE BUILT AT SPRINGS

A spa and bathhouse were built adjacent to Warm Mineral Springs in 1946. Developer Sam Herron Jr. purchased the property in 1955, four years before the city of North Port was



This woman around 1950 is shown enjoying a mud bath in Warm Mineral Springs. Thousands still flock to the historic site to bathe in the mineral rich water believed to cure many different illnesses.



Amateur archaeologist William Royal estimated he spent some 3,000 hours diving in Warm Mineral Springs where he discovered fossils, tools, and human remains. He also discovered a skull (in photo) containing some brain matter. The skull was determined to be about 10,000 years old.

incorporated. Herron began developing an adjacent housing development, platting 3,000 lots on the property. He hired Victor Lundy, a noted architect who had designed his Sarasota School of Architecture home in Venice, to develop the Warm Mineral Springs Motel he constructed along the Tamiami Trail.

In brochures promoting Warm Mineral Springs and the nearby development, Herron touted the healing effects of the mineralized waters, even suggesting that drinking the water

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PHOTOS PROVIDED

In the mid-1950s, developer Sam Herron Jr. constructed a development adjacent to the Springs and platted 3,000 lots on the property. He also built the Warm Mineral Springs Motel at the Springs entrance on U.S. 41.

Springs/from B1

“has a pleasantly mild laxative effect.”
 Reminding readers that it was the only warm spring in Florida, the brochure went on to quote a Friar Ortiz as having informed Ponce De León in 1511 that “The Indians know of a warm spring, flowing from a seemingly bottomless crater, having wondrous powers of healing those who bathe therein and drink of these magic waters.”

Who could resist such an invitation?

Warm Mineral Springs was one of seven sites invited to participate in Florida’s Quadricentennial celebration in 1959. A new spa building and cyclorama, designed by fellow Sarasota School architect Jack West, were constructed for the occasion.

The circular-shaped cyclorama depicts Ponce de León’s quest for the Fountain of Youth.

Listed by the city of North Port as a historic landmark, the Warm Mineral Springs complex was added to the National Register of Historic Places in November 1977, with the buildings added in 2019.

EARLY PLANS FOR THE SPRINGS

The property continued to draw the interest of both archeologists and wellness experts. An article in the March 15, 1991 edition of the Sarasota Herald-Tribune reported discussion between the State of Florida and Sarasota Memorial Hospital to jointly purchase the property with the idea of building a health center on the site



The interior of the badly damaged cyclorama building at Warm Mineral Springs shows murals painted on the walls that some want to salvage.

while continuing to take advantage of the springs’ therapeutic waters.

Herron and his partners sold the complex to a group of investors in 1999, indicating they planned to turn the property into an international wellness community.

The springs is particularly popular among Europeans who visit and live in the area and believe in the healing properties of the mineral rich water.

Warm Mineral Springs was purchased on Dec. 20, 2010 by Sarasota County and the city of North Port for \$5.5 million. North Port developed an ambitious master plan for rehabilitating and expanding the complex and, in 2022, issued a request for developing the property, providing \$18 million in repairs and renovations for the existing buildings while allowing for some of the undeveloped land to be used for hotel space, condos, and shops.

A plan for development was reached with WMS Development Group, but the public was adamantly against the idea of over-commercializing the site.

The developer pulled out of the agreement last February and the plans were shelved.

In September 2022, Hurricane Ian caused significant damage to the historic spa and cyclorama. Upon considering the cost of renovating these structures, North Port’s City Commission voted to determine how much it would cost to demolish the structures and replace them with a modern ticket office.

Various non-profit organizations, including the Sarasota Alliance for Historic Preservation, are working with the city to explore other options for saving the structures.

Despite the deterioration of buildings, the springs continues to be a popular tourist draw, collecting more than \$1 million annually in entry fees and concessions.


Rick Kilby, environmentalist and author of “Finding the Fountain of Youth: Ponce de Leon and Florida’s Magical Waters,” said there are many reasons for restoring the cyclorama.

“It can be a wonderful resource for heritage tourism; there are very few

places left in the state with the opportunity to share such a complete view of Florida history. It could be incorporated as part of a larger narrative that covers the archeological, anthropological, and environmental history of the region.”

Earlier this month, the Florida Trust for Historic Preservation included Warm Mineral Springs in its annual “11 to Save” listing of the state’s most threatened historic places.

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