

## Leaders team up to house historical treasures

By **GREG MARTIN**  
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**PUNTA GORDA** — One wall in Vernon Peeples' house is a map of Florida published by the Morgan Steamship Lines in 1888.

The map displays the four prominent destinations served by its steamships: New Orleans, Punta Gorda, Key West and Havana.

On another wall are several drawings of Charlotte Harbor's rustic environs. They were sketched by famed Western artist Frederic Remington.

The pictures include one of a sniper in a palmetto thicket taking aim at a passing horseback rider. It was drawn during the "cattle feud" of the mid-1890s, a period in which there were so many assassinations,

lawmakers adopted a \$1,000 permit fee on rifles, Peeples recalls.

Elsewhere in Peeples' library is a Dec. 31, 1886, letter that town founder Isaac Trabue wrote to his cousin. Trabue was announcing that he had "made the deal" to bring the railroad to town.

Those are just a few of several thousand books, photos, newspapers and maps that the 82-year-old Peeples has collected since he first began amassing historical treasures at age 11.

Those artifacts may get preserved in a public history center, if a collaborative effort between Peeples and a recently formed corporation proves successful.

The Punta Gorda History



SUN PHOTO BY GREG MARTIN

**Gene Murtha, president of the Punta Gorda History Center, and Vernon Peeples hold an 1851 map of Florida. The map, one of 200 in Peeples' historical archives, is the first government chart that designates Punta Gorda as a place name.**

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Center was incorporated within the past month, said Gene Murtha, a Team Punta Gorda member who has been elected the center's first president.

The center's board includes attorney Ed Wotitzky, accountant Eddie Webb, Robert "Bucky" McQueen and Peeples, whose grandfather served on Florida's first Legislature in 1845.

Other board members include Team Punta Gorda Executive Director Nancy Prajke, Mural Society president Ron Norsell and Historical Society member Helen Wrobbel.

"It's mind-boggling," said Murtha of Peeples' collection. "The breadth of this collection is huge."

The board has applied for 501(c)(3) tax-exempt status. It plans to hold strategic planning sessions in August and September, and a "town

hall meeting" next fall.

The board is exploring using the second floor of the Historic Charlotte County Courthouse in downtown Punta Gorda as an interim center.

"The purpose of this is for education and research," Murtha said. "We're doing it because, as time goes by, you really don't want this stuff to disappear from the face of the Earth."

Peeples said he became interested in history because his parents,

who arrived in 1933, ran a grocery store in downtown Punta Gorda, where many of the town's early inhabitants shopped.

Also, in 1941 and 1943, Peeples served as a page for the state House of Representatives. Back then, the Capitol's library was located between the House and Senate chambers. During lulls, Peeples said he'd research the state's history.

"I had free reign of the place and I just

took advantage of it," Peeples said.

Peeples pointed out half of Charlotte County's population is replaced with newcomers every eight years.

"As a result, we do need to preserve our history," he said. "It has all kinds of implications — socially, economically, politically."

"If you don't see where you've been, you can't know where you're going," he added.

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