INTRODUCTION

Five ocean piers have graced the metro Jacksonville shore since 1901. Four were in Duval County; one in northern St. Johns County!! People like to fish. An ocean pier means fishing without the expense of a boat. Each featured fishing. One was a dancing pier. Two contained restaurants. Three sold drinks, snacks, and, sometimes meals. They were built from Atlantic Beach south to the shore of Palm Valley. Learning which was which and keeping them straight can tax the mind, especially if one was not alive to see a particular pier. Hence, I have created this illustrated chronology.

1. Continental Hotel/Atlantic Beach Hotel Pier

On June 1, 1901, Henry M. Flagler opened his Continental Hotel in Atlantic Beach. The yellow hotel was 47 feet by 447 feet with a six story rotunda and five story wings. The dining room could seat 350. There were 186 sleeping apartments (later 200) and 56 baths. It had numerous outbuildings. It was spectacular as these images show. Jutting into the ocean was an 800 foot long pier, three quarters roofed, from which people fished or promenaded.
Postcard of Continental Hotel
Flagler’s interests lay farther south, so, in 1911, his company leased the Continental Hotel for ten years to A. S. Stanford who represented the American Resort Hotel Company. In 1913, the hotel and 4,000 acres north to the south jetty were sold by the Florida East Coast Hotel Company to E. R. Brackett and a consortium of New York capitalists who formed the Atlantic Beach Corporation and renamed it the Atlantic Beach Hotel. Within a few years and several changes in ownership, the Atlantic Beach Hotel was leased to W. H. Adams, Sr. In November, 1917. Adams owned the Ocean View Hotel in Jacksonville Beach as well as businesses in Jacksonville.¹

Fires too often swept through wooden buildings and the Hotel burned down on September 20, 1919, a loss of $300,000.² The pier and a few buildings on the Hotel property survived. The photos below, rarely seen, show the devastation.
Atlantic Beach Hotel, 1919

Photo Courtesy of the Beaches Museum
Adams bought the remaining buildings, water works, and electric plant of the old Continental/Atlantic Beach Hotel and began anew. The Florida East Coast Hotel Company still owned some of the original forty acres. Adams and his wife Juliette opened the Atlantic Beach Inn and Donac Shell Tea Room in what was the bowling alley. They added a second story in order to accommodate more guests. The Inn’s restaurant became famous for seafood dinners. Donacs [donax] are small clams, indigenous to the area, and Juliette
was famous for her donac soup.

Atlantic Beach Inn and Donac Shell Tea Room

**The Atlantic Beach Hotel and Pier (1925-1964)**

Within six years, the Adams erected the new Atlantic Beach Hotel next to and adjoining the Inn. Triumphanty, they opened the fifty-room, stucco hotel in June 1925. Then they added to it, by building a 50' by 150' swimming pool in 1929.3 Besides hotel guests, others could pay to use the pool and, if necessary, its two-story bath house with changing rooms on separate floors for men and women. One could enter the pool area or go directly to the ocean. Originally, it was a salt water pool, “an inland ocean” some called it, but, after a few years, it was converted to fresh water. The local Fletcher Junior-Senior High School swim teams practiced there.

Adams’ sons, W. H., Jr. and Gerry, repaired the Atlantic Beach pier probably after the new Atlantic Beach Hotel opened. Part of the pier was roofed.4

Jutting into the ocean, the hotel's pier provided sightseeing and fishing. Kids, lovers, friends, the elderly, and the curious would wander out to its end both day and night. Lovers preferred the night, and especially preferred moonlit
nights. Fishing, however, was almost always a daytime activity.
Hurricane Dora destroyed the pier in September, 1964, leaving only pilings which survived for years. Gerry Adams kept sixty feet protruding from the seawall to maintain the right of the Hotel to have a pier.

Laura “Flickie” Adams Crowson and Nancy Adams, daughters of owner Gerry Adams, supplied the snapshots below.
A post-Dora aerial view shows the damage to the pier as well as to the Hotel. The Hotel was repaired but the pier, which earned no income, was not.
2. Jacksonville Beach pier, 1922-1961

The first Jacksonville Beach pier was built in 1922. "The Pablo Beach Company plans to erect a $250,000 hotel with 132 rooms. A large pier is being built at the beach, to be completed by May 1. It will extend over the water 450 feet and be 25 feet wide. There will be amusement booths and a special place for fishing." Charles Shad, Charles Hawkins, and Martin Williams formed a pier company and sought permission from the City of Pablo Beach (as Jacksonville Beach was then called) to build an ocean pier that would contain a dancing pavilion as well as a fishing extension. City officials wanted a steel pier like the one in Atlantic City, New Jersey, but such a pier was too expensive. They allowed a wooden pier with the provisos that it would not serve as a dock or landing field for airplanes. Shad died late in 1922. Hawkins took control of the pier. Jack Pate, in his essay "'The Old Pier,'" says that the pier extended 650 feet across the ocean from its entrance on the boardwalk. At its outer end was a
60x90 foot-dancing pavilion, with a fishing pier at the lower part of the pavilion. Provisions were made for concessions, walking spaces, and benches, but it was not long before billboards and garish advertisements of all sorts made their unsightly appearances and obstructed the view from the walkways. The pier had a 10kw Cushman generator to power its lights, which were said to be visible from as far away as Atlantic Beach. Later on a huge revolving ball encrusted with thousands of iridescent and varied-colored glass squares was installed in the pavilion. This was said to give the effect of “either a pale moonlight night or a brilliant rainbow, flashing an endless variety of colors to every part of the pavilion and imparting a feeling that was at once beautiful and weird.” Shad, however, died in late 1922, so he never knew how much he had accomplished. Hawkins and Williams assumed control of the pier.

Within a few years, the pier had structural problems. The City of Jacksonville Beach, through Superintendent Warren Smith, placed a sign at the entrance warning that people went onto the pier at their own risk. Waves and wind had wreaked much damage. The newspaper editor, William Koehler, opined that, besides the pier being derelict, advertisements should never have been affixed to the structure. He said the pier was “misconstructed” and demanded that the owners remove it or the city should do it. The owners repaired it.

In the 1920’s through the 1940s, the pier had big-named bands and dances on weekends. One was being held the night the April 10, 1942 when a German submarine torpedoed the oil tanker, the S.S. GulfAmerica. A boy, Martin G. Williams, Jr., witnessed the event and later wrote about it.
Storms as well as age meant repairs had to be made. At one point, the fishing extension was swept away only to be rebuilt. As Pate says, it burned in 1937 but was rebuilt. Some old timers said there was a whirlpool at the end of the pier in the 1920s but that myth was probably just a reflection of the pier’s iconic presence at Pablo.

“Due to its exposed position in the ocean and its wooden construction, the pier suffered severe damage on several occasions. A winter storm wrecked it in late 1925; winter waves washed away the fishing pier in 1932; and a fire in October 1938 completely wiped out the main superstructure of the pier including the dance pavilion about 150 feet of the approach from the boardwalk.” Charles W. Hawkins of Jacksonville, owner, had insurance. E.W. Compton owned concessions, equipment, and furnishings which were lost.² Fire struck again in 1949.
This photograph, probably taken before 1924, shows the pier before it had an extension for fishing. Several elements help us date it. On the right side of the photo is the Little Coney Island amusement park which was torn down in January, 1925. Between the pier and Little Coney Island was the Ocean View Hotel and its bath houses. On the lower left quadrant are the Florida East Coast Railway station on the tracks turning north towards Mayport.
1928 pier and the boardwalk

Photo Courtesy of the Beaches Museum
Circa 1937

Photo Courtesy of the Beaches Museum
Circa 1934

When the pier burned in 1938, its replacement no longer had a rounded pavilion and the fishing extension was straight.
Pier and beach, 1956

View of pier, amusement parks, and beach, 1958
More than one person owned the first Jacksonville Beach pier. After his
crudely friend Shad died, Williams sold his share to Hawkins in order to focus
on his boardwalk businesses. Others owned it subsequently as different men
wrestled with the cost of maintenance and earning a profit. At its demise, the
City of Jacksonville Beach owned it. The 6th Avenue South pier, built in 1960,
made “Shad’s pier” a white elephant.

The old pier, the dancing-fishing pier between 2nd and 3rd Avenues, came
under scrutiny by the City Council because it was rickety. The structure had
been leased to Curtis Amerson for one and one-half years by its owner, W. E.
Montgomery, uncle of Mayor Justin C. Montgomery. At the end of Amerson’s
lease, the pier would revert to the city. Amerson agreed to make repairs within
30 days, including 40-50 pilings, its sewer system, and its electrical system, facets
of the pier that had fallen into disrepair under the last lessee, Paul Ward. City
manager Buford McRae had had to close the pier when Ward didn’t fix things.
The Beach News & Advertiser featured three photos of the pier’s understructure
to illustrate the damage. The Chamber of Commerce, who had many
boardwalk business owners, wanted the city to repair the pier and assume the
lease of the present defunct operator, former mayor W. E. “Monty”
Montgomery. Chamber president, Frank A. Griffen, who owned one of the
amusement parks, argued that the pier could be made operational for two
thousand dollars. Others estimated the cost could go as high as eighteen
thousand dollars. The difficulty was that private enterprise had failed to
modernize, much less maintain, the pier. 11
The 1962 fire destroyed this pier, a pier no one wanted. Demolishing the old pier turned out to be a difficult decision. The city owned the pier as of May 1 and had let bids to have it destroyed. Councilmen Moses Stormes and Forrest Bryant as well as merchants wanted to wait until September so beach would be open. The Council voted 5-2 in May to continue plans to demolish it even though Councilmen Bryant and Stormes and some merchants wanted the city to delay until September so the demolition process would not interfere with the tourists enjoying the beach. Demolition would be expensive and Stormes joked that it should be burned because it would only take 3 days—one to burn, two to clean up. When the bids were opened on June 5, P. L. Burkhalter Company offered the low bid of $16,723. City Manager Walter F. Johnson got the Council to reject all bids asserting that city crews could do it more cheaply. Later, the Council decided that Johnson should study the issue further because demolition would be dangerous.12

Then, on Friday, October 13, 1962, one day before the city council was going to condemn it, the dancing pavilion and much of the rest of the pier was consumed by fire. The fire was fortuitous because the city council had been discussing the demolition of the pier since May, 1961; city firemen watched it burn. Nevertheless, parents hosted an all-night dance after the Fletcher Junior-Senior Prom of Fletcher High School as late as June 1960.
3. Mickler’s Pier (1936-1948)

Sidney Alexander Mickler built a 696 foot long fishing pier south of Ponte Vedra at the east end of Mickler Road. The WWI veteran was forty-one. We know a great deal about the construction process from his son, Sid, in Sidney J. Mickler and Julie Mickler Bhatia, As I Remember It. Sid the father enlisted the help of relatives in Palm Valley. They used an ax and a crosscut saw to cut palm logs from the interior and drag them to the beach using a Model A Ford. He bought lumber from Charles Bennett’s saw mill and nails by the keg. The process was primitive but worked. Sid the son, although young, helped and his memories of the process are fascinating.13

He built an office (the shack-like building in the photos) where fishermen could buy soft drinks, peanut crackers, and, shrimp for bait. Also on the pier was a 15 foot tall windmill to pump water from the ocean into a dory on deck in
which freshly caught fish were stored. The dory had a drainage hole, so the fish were bathed with flowing water. Drinking water was supplied by a deep well and a pump near the foot of pier. He also built an outhouse in the dunes.

The pier opened August 1, 1936, having been started in June. The sign below errs in saying 1935.
Mary Afton Mickler, Sid A. Mckler’s daugther

Photo courtesy of Beaches Museum
Sid Mickler’s Pier
Early 1940’s post card
A storm destroyed the pier in 1948, Sid the father died the same year. The area is Mickler’s Landing Beach today.

4. Sixth Avenue South Jacksonville Beach Pier (aka Bone’s Pier) (1960-2002)
1967 photo of Life Guard Station and Flag Pavilion in foreground; 6th Ave. S. pier near top.
Photo Courtesy of Beaches Museum
Robert L. Williams built a fishing pier with a restaurant at Sixth Avenue South in 1960. It was 1,200 feet long; people who fished loved it. He chose a spot a few blocks south of the business district. Williams wanted it to be as much like the old pier with dancing and beer sales to supplement the income from fishermen. At first, the City Council balked because it seemed to be replicating what some thought was undesirable about the old pier, but later agreed to allow the sale of alcoholic beverages. Lewis Stewart was awarded a beer license so he could have a tavern. Beer halls or taverns had existed since the city had been founded as Ruby Beach in 1884.
Williams owned this pier for a number of years and then sold to George Bone. Locals nicknamed it “Bone’s Pier.” Eve Bates worked on the pier from 1972-1983 and wrote about Bone and the variety of people who frequented it. She tells good stories. She liked the handsome owner but thought he had poor management skills; his daughter, Rhonda Bone Wilson, eventually took over. Fishermen loved the pier, especially its reach into the ocean, Record catches were made.

This pier, like its predecessors, suffered storm damage more than once. Hurricane Dora took 196 feet (some say 137-feet) off the ocean end on September 9, 1964; repairs and demolition finally brought the loss to be 400 feet. Fishermen and sightseers regretted the loss, of course. Worse, however, was the damage caused by Hurricane Floyd in September, 1999; most of it collapsed into the ocean! The restaurant and gift shop remained open. “Pier owner
Rhonda [née Bone] Wilson Robinson said she had no timetable on when the pier might reopen to fishing. Jacksonville Beach officials have given her 20 days to fix or remove the pier, seek an extension, or face paying demolition costs.”

On June 16, 2000, The City of Jacksonville agreed to spend a million dollars to buy and restore the pier. Rhonda Robinson sold it for $650,000. Work proceeded. It looked good in September, 2001 when I took these photos, but demolition of most it occurred December, 2001. The City government began to build a new pier.

6th Avenue South pier, September, 2001  Photo by Don Mabry
An arsonist destroyed its Pier Pointe restaurant on June 17, 2002. The restaurant was vacant and without electricity since the fire damage on July 4, 2001. Various people—kids, the curious, and the homeless—had visited the structure, but no one knew who had done it. The pier was then demolished.¹⁹
5. Fifth Avenue pier (2004- )

The City of Jacksonville decided to construct a fishing pier at Fifth Avenue North in Jacksonville Beach jutting out from Ocean Front Park which Jacksonville Beach created. They would enhance the northern limits of downtown. Originally planned as a 1,000 foot pier, it was extended to 1,300 feet to avoid the sand bar at the thousand foot mark. Fishermen applauded; one could deep sea fish while standing above the ocean and without a deep sea fishing license. Sightseers got a panoramic view of the shore, often watching high-rise construction in progress. Sturdier than previous piers because it used concrete pylons and easily-replaced decking, it opened in December, 2004 to great fanfare.
Pier construction

Photo by Don Mabry
Pier Construction

Photo by Don Mabry
Stormy weather 5th Avenue N. pier,   Photo by Don Mabry
5th Avenue N. pier, December, 2007

Photo by Don Mabry
Tropical Storm Fay threw high winds and waves at the pier in August, 2008, damaging but not destroying it. Some of the panels were ripped off. The T-shaped end suffered the most. Both Jacksonville Beach and Jacksonville (which owned the pier) paid the repairs bills.²⁰

**CONCLUSION**

These ocean piers reflect the history of the Jacksonville beaches since 1901, a period of 114 years, the first pier that of the Continental Hotel, was built for wealthy people; the fifth pier, built by the City of Jacksonville, was built for everyone to enjoy. All except the current pier were built by private enterprise which demanded an income stream sufficient to operate and maintain the structure while earning a profit for the proprietor(s). There was always maintenance for normal wear and tear as the respective piers aged. Storms
could turn profits to losses. Sid Mickler probably had the lowest startup and maintenance costs. His pier was amazing because it was built by him, his family, and friends, none of whom had formal training in pier construction. He and his pier died the same year. No one was willing to restore the other three wooden piers. Dancing piers were disappearing even before dancing ceased being a very popular pastime; Bone’s Pier and the 5th Avenue North pier were constructed without dance pavilions for that reason. People who fished did not generate enough income to rebuild after major storm damage. Restaurants and the sale of alcoholic beverages helped the profit margin.

Governments insured that the Jacksonville coast would have a fishing pier and a scenic structure by building the 5th Avenue pier and the park in front of it. Using modern techniques, the designers and engineers built a very long fishing pier (almost a quarter of a mile long) out of concrete and wooden panels which would withstand natural sway and suffer minimal damage from storms. The cost was in the millions. Jacksonville hired a private firm to manage the pier. Unlike the private owners of piers, the managing company did not incur the costs in erecting or maintaining the pier; their profit was guaranteed. When Tropical Storm Fay damaged the pier in 2008, it was the Jacksonville government paid for repairs.

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Paula C. Mabry has been patient listening to me ramble about these piers and their backstories.

Notes on Sources

The endnotes show some of the sources I used to write this article but the bulk of them came from what I learned during my extensive research and writing on the history of the beaches on the coast of Jacksonville. Below is a list.

BOOKS

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