

Where did Vero Beach get its name?

Pamela J. Cooper, retired librarian and historian, Vero Beach, Florida

Post Office Application	29 September 1891
Vero Platted by Herman Zeuch	1913-14
Vero Incorporated	10 June 1919
Vero Changed to Vero Beach and incorporated	19 May 1925
Indian River County formed	30 June 1925
Official Flower approved: Hibiscus	17 October 1967

IRC History-VF No. 1011 (LOCATION PAPER.)

Post Office Department,
OFFICE OF THE FOURTH ASSISTANT-POSTMASTER GENERAL,
APPOINTMENT DIVISION
WASHINGTON, D. C., Sep 19 1891

Sir: Before the Postmaster General decides upon the application for the establishment of a post office at Vero (VERO), County of Indian River, State of Florida, it will be necessary for you to carefully answer the subjoined questions, get a neighboring postmaster to certify to the correctness of the answers, and return the location paper to the Department, addressed to me. If the site selected for the proposed office should not be on any mail route now under contract, only a "Special Office" can be established there, to be supplied with mail from some convenient point on the nearest mail route by special delivery, in accordance with the provisions of the Act and Regulations of 1887, for which service a sum equal to two-thirds of the amount of the salary of the postmaster at such office will be paid by the Department.

You should inform the contractor, or person performing service for him, of this application, and require him to execute the inclosed certificate as to the practicability of supplying the proposed office with mail, and return the same to the Department.

Very respectfully,
E. J. R. Rathbone
Fourth Asst. Postmaster General

To Mr. H. T. Gifford
care of the Postmaster of Narrows who will please forward to him.
Vero Beach Indian River County 1925

STATEMENT.

The proposed office to be called Narrows (VERO.)

Select a short name for the proposed office, which, when written, will not resemble the name of any other post office in the State.

It will be situated in the East quarter of Section 1, Township 32, Range 39, in the County of Indian River, State of Florida.
It will be on or near route No. 2094, being the route from Indian River to Narrows, in which the mail is now carried 2 times per week.
If not, how far from it—one mile from Indian River.
If not on any route, is a "Special Office" wanted?—Yes. To be supplied with mail by contract.

The name of the nearest office to the proposed one, on one side, is Indian River, its distance is one miles in a West direction from the proposed office.
The name of the nearest office, on the other side, is Narrows, its distance is one miles in a West direction from the proposed office.
The name of the other nearest office to the proposed one is Indian River, its distance by the most direct road is one miles in a West direction from the proposed office.
The name of the most prominent river near it is Indian River, its distance is one miles from said river, on the West side of it and will be one miles from said river, on the West side of it.
The name of the nearest railroad is Indian River.
If on the line of or near a railroad, on which side will the office be located? how far from the track; and what is, or will be, the name of the station?—Indian River.
If it be a village, state the number of inhabitants—one.
Also, the population to be supplied by the proposed office—one.
A diagram, or sketch from a map, showing the position of the proposed new office, with neighboring river or creek, roads, and other post offices, towns, or villages near it, will be useful, and is therefore desired.
A correct map of the locality might be furnished by the county surveyor, but this must be without expense to the Post Office Department.

All which I certify to be correct and true, according to the best of my knowledge and belief, this 29 day of September, 1891.
(Sign full name.) Henry Gifford Proposed P. M.
I certify that I have examined the foregoing statement, and that it is correct and true, to the best of my knowledge and belief.
E. J. R. Rathbone
Postmaster at Narrows

The younger generation of Vero Beach often called their hometown "Zero Beach," a place where they claimed that "there was nothing to do." It is ironic that when you look at the first post office application of 1891, it appears that the Postmaster General changed the name to ZERO possibly thinking the applicant had misspelled the name. (See image) It was returned to the Post Office Department by Henry T. Gifford with a bolded letter **V** written over the **Z**.

There are over a dozen theories on the origination of name "Vero." Listed below are suggested or published possibilities, many quite intriguing and one, the Flagler Railroad theory, that may prove to be the "real reason" for the name.

1. **Vero was named after Vera, the wife of Henry Gifford.** Gifford's wife's name was Sarah and not Vera. Numerous articles have been published that erroneously state that Vero was named after the wife of Henry Gifford^{1, 2}. His wife's name was Sarah Jane Woodworth (1842-1894) and she married Henry about 1878 in Orange County, Vermont³. No family members had the given name of "Vero" or "Vera" for five generations. (See Gifford

Family History located in the vertical file at the Main Library.)

2. **Vero was named after two Italian cities Venice or Verona, and due to postal regulations, "the name must have only four letters."** It was not till 1894 that the post office asked for applicants for new post offices to "shorten" names, and that requirement did not mandate that the names be only four letters.⁴

¹ Morris, A. (1995) Florida Place Names. Sarasota, FL: Pineapple Press, Inc., p. 245.

² Smiley, N. (1972) Florida: Land of Images. Miami, FL: E. A. Seemann Publishing, Inc. pp. 76-86.

³ United States. Bureau of the Census. (1880) Orange County, Vermont. National Archives Microfilm T9, Roll #1346.

⁴ Thompson, W. C. (1961, April 20) "Pioneer Chit-Chat." The Press Journal. Vero Beach, Fl. Page 8.

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Some printed records⁵ state that Sarah Gifford suggested naming the area after two Italian cities: Venice and Verona. (See excerpt below on Post Office Guidelines of 1894 - NOT 1891.) Because Indian River County had several existing towns in the area at that time, such as Sebastian, Woodley, and the Narrows, all names that were not four letters, this theory most likely is not accurate. Research of the Woodworth family revealed that some of Sarah's relatives lived in Verona, New York: This part of the theory is speculation and can only add to the mystery. The real mystery lies in the word "Vero" itself, which is a Latin word.

Post Office Policies on Place Names:⁶

The first official reference to the naming of post offices by the Post Office Department occurred in 1891. On February 18 of that year, Postmaster General Miscellaneous Order #87 alerted the clerks, first those of the Division of Appointment and the Division of Bonds and later those in all branches of the Department, to use the spelling of post office names published in the bulletins of the United States Board on Geographic Names, which in 1906 was given the authority to determine and change place-names.

*On April 14, 1892, Postmaster General Miscellaneous Order #48 directed the Fourth Assistant Postmaster General not to establish any post office whose proposed name differed from that of the town or village in which it was to be located. **Whenever possible, the name of the post office was to be the same as that of the local railway station to avoid confusion and delay in the transfer of mail.***

On April 9, 1894, another directive was given. To remove a cause of annoyance to the Department and injury to the Postal Service in the selection of names for newly established post offices, it is hereby ordered that from this date only short names or names of one word will be accepted.

- The name Vero came from the Latin word for "Veritas" - adverb Verus or Vero meaning "truth," "in fact," "indeed," and/or "to be sure."** Sarah Gifford's son, Friend Charles Gifford, described his mother as a person who loved to study Italy and Italian literature⁷. She also spoke Latin^{8,9}. She educated her children⁶, and, in fact, her daughter Nettie May was one of the first school teachers in Indian River County. *Veritas* is the plural form of the Latin word *Verus*. The adverb for *Verus* is *Vero* which means "in truth," "really," "indeed" or "in fact." Since Sarah did know Latin, this theory of her choosing a Latin word is reasonable and perhaps the most likely. It would have been interesting to understand why she felt Vero was a place for truth.
- Good friends of the Gifford family were from Centerville, Michigan and the wife's name was Vera Leinbach.**¹⁰ According to published records, the Giffords may have wanted to name the town after Vera. According to hearsay, the name became Vero because of a typographical error and postal regulation. No proof of this statement is available, and research shows that despite the published records, there does not seem to be a connection between the families.
- Hurricanes "veered" away from our area, so they called it Vero.** This was mentioned by several people but does not seem plausible.

⁵ Lockwood, C. (1975). *Florida's Historic Indian River County*. Vero Beach, FL: MediaTronics, Inc. p. 38.

⁶ Post Office Department Reports of Site Locations, 1837-1950. National Archives and Records Service: Washington D.C. ; Record of Appointment of Postmasters, 1832-September 30, 1971. National Archives and Records Service: Washington D.C. ; Records of the Post Office Department, Record Group 28, Series M841, Reel 20. ; Records of the Post Office Department, Record Group 28, Series M1126, Reel 92.

⁷ Newman, A. P. L. (1953). *Stories of Early Life Along Beautiful Indian River*. Stuart, FL: Stuart Daily News, Inc., p. 11.

⁸ Bloodworth, B. E. and Morris, A. C. (1978) *Places in the Sun: The History and Romance of Florida Place-Names*. Gainesville, FL: The University Presses of Florida. p. 173.

⁹ Rohlfing-Lee, S. (1979, November 14). "What's in a name?" The Press Journal. p. 10a.

¹⁰ *Thompson, William (Pete) C. Pioneer Chit Chat*, August 31, 1961 p2B, *Vero Beach Press Journal*

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6. **The Spanish word¹¹ Vero means a fur-bearing animal like a Martin or Otter.** At one time there were numerous otters on the Indian River.
 7. **Portuguese word "Vero" means warm summer climate.** A nice possibility to think about.
 8. **Italian word¹² "Vero" means "It's incredible but true!"** Another very nice possibility.
 9. **Vero was named after Florida's first Catholic Archbishop Augustin Verot (pronounced Vero) 1804-1876.** Vero was the first Catholic Bishop of St. Augustine from 1870 until his death in 1876. Vero was a part of the Diocese of St. Augustine until 1958.¹³ There were no Catholic churches in the area before 1900.
 10. **An email¹⁴ was received from a family with the surname Vero in Warwickshire, England.** In this email the Vero family who conjecture that Vero might have been named after their family. Research has not proven this to be the case, and no Vero family has been located in Florida.
 11. **A man by the name of Herbert S. Britt was paid \$13.00 a month to bring mail by rowboat and he named the post office.** Britt rowed from the Narrows Post Office (Johns Island) to the Henry T. Gifford home in Vero once a week. According to hearsay, the name Vero was accredited to him. However, the reason is not known, and further research is needed to prove or disprove this particular theory.
 12. **Flagler Railroad Theory.¹⁵** Often controversial and extremely wealthy, Henry Flagler is known for laying the tracks of the Florida East Coast Railroad. In the early newspapers of the 1890's, there were reports and often letters to the editor about the status of the FEC. When the time was getting close for the tracks to be laid down in Indian River County, many people were upset that Flagler was considering putting the tracks on the west side of the river, the mainland. In letters to the editor signed by "Veritas" and "Progress," locals on Orchid Island, the east side of the river asked: "Why all of the fruits and vegetables were being grown on the East side on the islands. How were they going to travel across the river in time to catch the train? After all, no one on the mainland was really selling very much."¹⁵
- The use of the Latin word Veritas in these letters to the editor could serve to reinforce theory #3 because the laying down of the Flagler Railroad tracks was happening at the time of the naming of Vero.
13. **Vero is "the real thing!"** Sarah Gifford suggested the word "Veritas" meaning "truth" according to the 1971-1972 "Florida Handbook." It states the word "Veritas" became Vero, the adverb form of Veritas. It further states it also means "the real thing." I am not sure where the author heard that phrase, but I like it!
 14. **The new town was first called Venice.** Nettie May and her father Henry Gifford arrived on the east coast of Florida in 1887. After a year, Henry returned home to Vermont to bring his wife Sarah and two other children to the new land. According to a 1939 interview in Orlando with Nettie May, she said her mother first called the new town Venice because they arrived during the rainy season and there was water everywhere. It would be about twenty years (1912-1913) later before they dug the canals that helped keep the water at bay. Sarah later learned there already was a town called Venice on the west coast of Florida, and she subsequently changed the name to Vero.

In 1925, "Beach" was added to the name.

¹¹ *Vox New College Spanish and English Dictionary*. Lincolnwood, IL: National Textbook Company, 1984.

¹² Ragazzini, Giuseppe. *Zanichelli New College Italian and English Dictionary*. Lincolnwood, IL: National Textbook Company, 1990

¹³ Fax dated May 26, 1998 from Vero Zimmerman to Pam (Hall) Cooper regarding Father Verot.

¹⁴ Email dated May 2, 1998 from Diana Palmer of England to Pam (Hall) Cooper.

¹⁵ "The Flagler Railway." (1894, January 26). *The Indian River Advocate*. p. 8.

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It is important to note that the local history books were written decades after the naming of the town, therefore much of the information comes from hearsay. The Post Office's alleged requirement of four-letter place names was never investigated, and debunked, until now. Sarah's education of her children testifies to her knowledge, and her use of Latin is the simplest of the explanations. The other theories are all speculations presented by different individuals and historians. It is hoped that future generations will find the "truth."

Note:

According to F. Charles Gifford, when the train stopped in Indian River County, Vero was first called "Tie-pile near Milepost 228" (Historical Chronicle, 1975). This is an incorrect statement. Flagler directed that a section camp at Gifford be designated as the station in 1894. Vero was designated as a post office in 1891. (Flagler, 1894).