

BAREFOOT MAILMAN

By Jim Archbold

The term **barefoot mailman** refers to the carriers on the first U.S. Mail route (1885-1892) between Palm Beach and the settlements around the body of water known as Lake Worth on the north, and Miami, Coconut Grove, and Lemon City to the south. The mailmen had to walk and travel by boat because there was no road connecting the 68-mile route from Palm Beach to Miami. Approximately 28 miles of the one way trip was by rowing different boats, and the rest by walking on the firmer sand along the beach. The route was a Star route, with the carriers contracting with the Post Office. The route was originally called the “barefoot route” and the carriers were called “beach walkists” or “beach walkers”. It was not until around 1940 that the term “barefoot mailman” came into use. The first barefoot mailman was Edwin Ruthven Bradley, a retired Chicago newsman, who won the postal contract in 1885 with a bid of \$600 per year. He and his son, Louis, took turns carrying the mail once a week for about two years. The third, and most famous, of the barefoot mailmen was James E. (Ed) Hamilton from Cadiz, Ky. He became the contractor when the first two quit in 1887. Hamilton disappeared while walking the barefoot route soon after October 10, 1887. He was not feeling well when he passed through Hypoluxo on the 10th. When Hamilton had not returned to Lake Worth at the end of the week, a search started. His possessions, including all of his clothes, were found on the north bank of the Hillsboro Inlet. He had never arrived at the Hillsboro lighthouse, south of the inlet. The boat that he used to cross the inlet was missing and his body was never recovered.

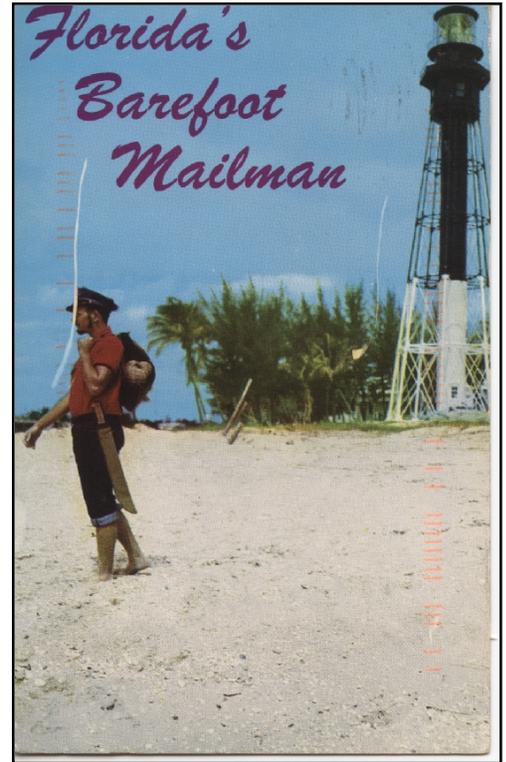


Figure 2



After Hamilton’s disappearance, Andrew Garnett, who had previously been the postmaster at Hypoluxo, successfully bid for

the barefoot route contract. Mr. Garnett had a substitute carrier and there were 9 other men reported as carriers along with the last one, Henry John Burkhardt.

A Florida state history marker [Figure 1] honoring the barefoot mailmen is located at Boca Raton on the grounds of the Spanish River State Park. The original stone statue of the Barefoot Mailman by Frank Varga is permanently displayed on the shores of the Hillsboro inlet next to the lighthouse [Figure 2]. It has a plaque in memory of James E. Hamilton, who lost his life in the Line of Duty.

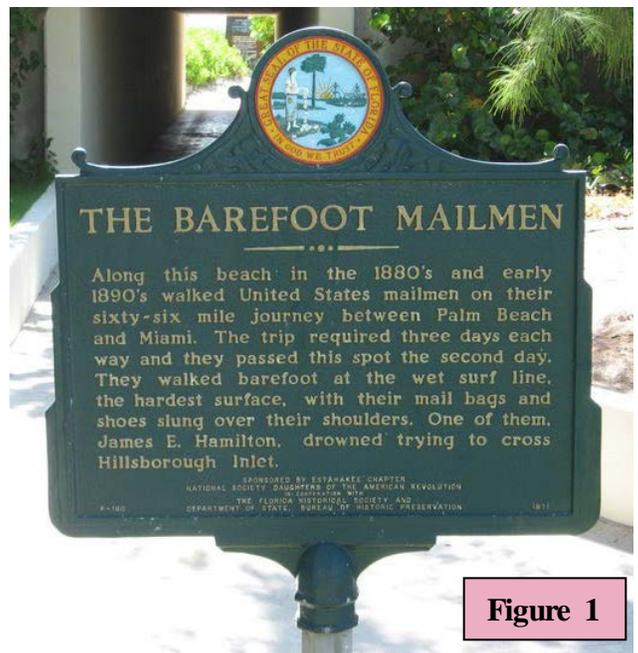


Figure 1

[Editor’s Note: I spent many a day at Spanish River Park in the 1970s and vividly remember the history marker. The passageway that can be seen in the upper left corner of that picture is the tunnel that goes under A1A connecting the beach front to the park side.]