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Hastings: Florida's Potato Capitol



# Hastings: Florida's Potato Capitol

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It is no secret that Florida is best known for its citrus industry, but did you know St. Johns County is home to Florida's Potato Capitol? To honor the harvest season, this blog outlines the rich history of the town of Hastings as it was a key player in the agricultural development of Florida's east coast and continues to produce and manufacture crops for the state.

## History of Hastings



Thomas Horace Hastings

Thomas Horace Hastings, a cousin of oil magnate Henry Flagler, established Prairie Garden, a 1,569-acre plantation just 18 miles west of St. Augustine with the intention of growing winter vegetables for Flagler's distinguished Hotel Ponce de Leon. At the time, the area was mostly wilderness and the nearest railway station was in Merryfield, but Hastings wanted one at Prairie Garden. Legend says Mr. Hastings may or may not have instigated a group of teens to move the station and put up a sign with his name on it.

Hastings officially received its charter in 1909 and Irish potatoes were the "big money" crop, earning the title "Florida's Potato Capitol." In 1917, potato prices soared which allowed locals to buy

cars, jewelry, furniture, and clothes while small businesses expanded. Agricultural pioneers like UJ White, WH Erwin, Frank Nix, and John T Dismukes introduced modern machinery and fertilization methods to improve crop yields.

After Dixie Highway was extended into the town, Hastings pulled visitors from St. Augustine and 1924 photos show digging season brought loads of traffic. Today, Hastings is the packing and shipping center for a tri-county potato growing area serving Flagler, Putnam, and St. Johns counties.

## Potato Grower's Association Building



Hastings Potato Grower's Association building

As the town of Hastings grew in the early 1900s, local growers recognized a need for the agency to sell their crops on their behalf. Several cooperatives formed until officially coming together in 1922 as the Hastings Potato Grower's Association. The group occupied what was once known as the Byrd Building until the Hastings Potato Growers Association building was finished in 1927. Today, the tall stucco structure stands empty on the other side of where the old railroad tracks used to be.

## Bulls-Hit Ranch



Bull's-Hit Ranch & Farm

Bulls-Hit Ranch & Farm is located in Hastings, Florida's self-proclaimed Potato Capital. The 1,500-acre farm along State Road 207 grows potatoes — white, Yellow Gold, and Atlantic — and cabbage, broccoli, cauliflower, corn, and hay. Bulls-Hit is best known for its delicious potato chips, Bulls Chips, which are no longer produced. They were thick, crunchy potato chips, fried by hand in kettles of cholesterol-free peanut oil, and sold at County Line Produce and other area stores. Launched in 1995, Bulls Chips sold about 52,000 bags a year.

## Railroad Park



Railroad Park

After a day of enjoying the farms, open fields, and horses in Hastings, make sure you visit Railroad Park! This park commemorates the importance of the railway to Florida's agriculture and industry. Find the Cora C. Harrison Preserve Trailhead, Potato Grower's Association building, and several amazing local eats along Main Street nearby. The park's covered picnic areas and gazebo are great for taking an afternoon picnic with the family!

## Hastings Cabbage, Potato, and Bacon Festival



**APRIL 27 & 28, 2024**

Savor culinary delights highlighting cabbage, potatoes, and bacon from vendors and experience farm-to-table cooking demonstrations by chefs **Hari Pulapaka**, **Chef Art Smith**, and **Michael Lugo**.

This carb-based hometown festival gets a dose of healthy competition with the Mow Down Lawn Mower Race, Miss Potato Queen Beauty Pageant, 5K & 10K Spud Run, and American Culinary Federation Sanctioned Cooking Competition

Admission is free, but some events are ticketed.

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Tags: *agriculture, florida, hastings, heritage, history*



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