

# Seminole Gulf Railway

The **Seminole Gulf Railway** (reporting mark **SGLR**) is a short line freight and passenger excursion railroad headquartered in Fort Myers, Florida, that operates two former CSX Transportation railroad lines in Southwest Florida. The company operates CSX's former Fort Myers Subdivision, which runs from Arcadia south to North Naples via Punta Gorda, Fort Myers, Estero, and Bonita Springs. They also operate another former CSX line that runs from Oneco south through Sarasota. Seminole Gulf acquired the lines in November 1987 and operates its own equipment, though CSX continues to own each line's right-of-way, which Seminole Gulf operates on under a long-term lease agreement.<sup>[1]</sup>

The Seminole Gulf Railway has a commonly owned affiliated company, the Bay Colony Railroad Corp. (reporting mark **BCLR**), which is based in southeastern Massachusetts.

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## Current operations

Seminole Gulf Railway is one of two freight railroad operating in Southwest Florida (the other is South Central Florida Express, who operates tracks farther inland near Clewiston). Freight is interchanged with CSX usually once or twice a week on each line. Freight transported by Seminole Gulf Railway includes lumber, propane, stone, steel, scrap metal, and other commodities.<sup>[2]</sup>

## Murder Mystery Dinner Train & Excursions

In addition to carrying freight, Seminole Gulf Railway also operates a popular Murder Mystery Dinner Train from Fort Myers. The dinner train runs five nights a week, year-round from a station at Colonial Boulevard north to a point just south of Punta Gorda before returning. The dinner train utilizes a fleet of 1930s-era vintage rail cars named "Sanibel", "Captiva", "Gasparilla", and "Marco" (named after nearby barrier islands) and is pulled by one of two vintage EMD F-unit

### Seminole Gulf Railway



EMD GP9 of the Seminole Gulf Railway

<b>Reporting mark</b>	SGLR
<b>Locale</b>	Southwest Florida
<b>Dates of operation</b>	1987–present
<b>Predecessor</b>	Atlantic Coast Line Railroad Seaboard Air Line Railroad CSX Transportation
<b>Track gauge</b>	4 <span> </span> ft 8 <span>1</span> <span>⁄</span> 2 <span> </span> in (1,435 <span> </span> mm) standard gauge
<b>Headquarters</b>	Fort Myers, Florida
<b>Website</b>	semgulf.com (http://semgulf.com)



SGLR 502 pulls the Murder Mystery Dinner Train near John Yarbrough Linear Park Trail.

locomotives, SGLR 502 and 501, that once operated on the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad, the Milwaukee Road, and the Long Island Rail Road. The dinner train includes a five-course dinner and has featured over 80 different murder mystery productions throughout its history.<sup>[3]</sup> Special holiday dinner trains also operate including *Sweetheart Express* on Valentine's Day, *Halloween Ghost Train*, *New Year's Eve Gala*, and *Christmas Rail-Boat* (which runs to the historic Punta Gorda Atlantic Coast Line Depot for a Christmas boat tour through Punta Gorda Isles) to name a few.<sup>[4][5]</sup>

Seminole Gulf has also operated general excursion trains in the past. Seminole Gulf introduced passenger excursion trains in 1991 after losing a major freight customer. Excursion trains and were initially based from a small platform in North Naples near Railhead Park, but moved to the current station at Colonial

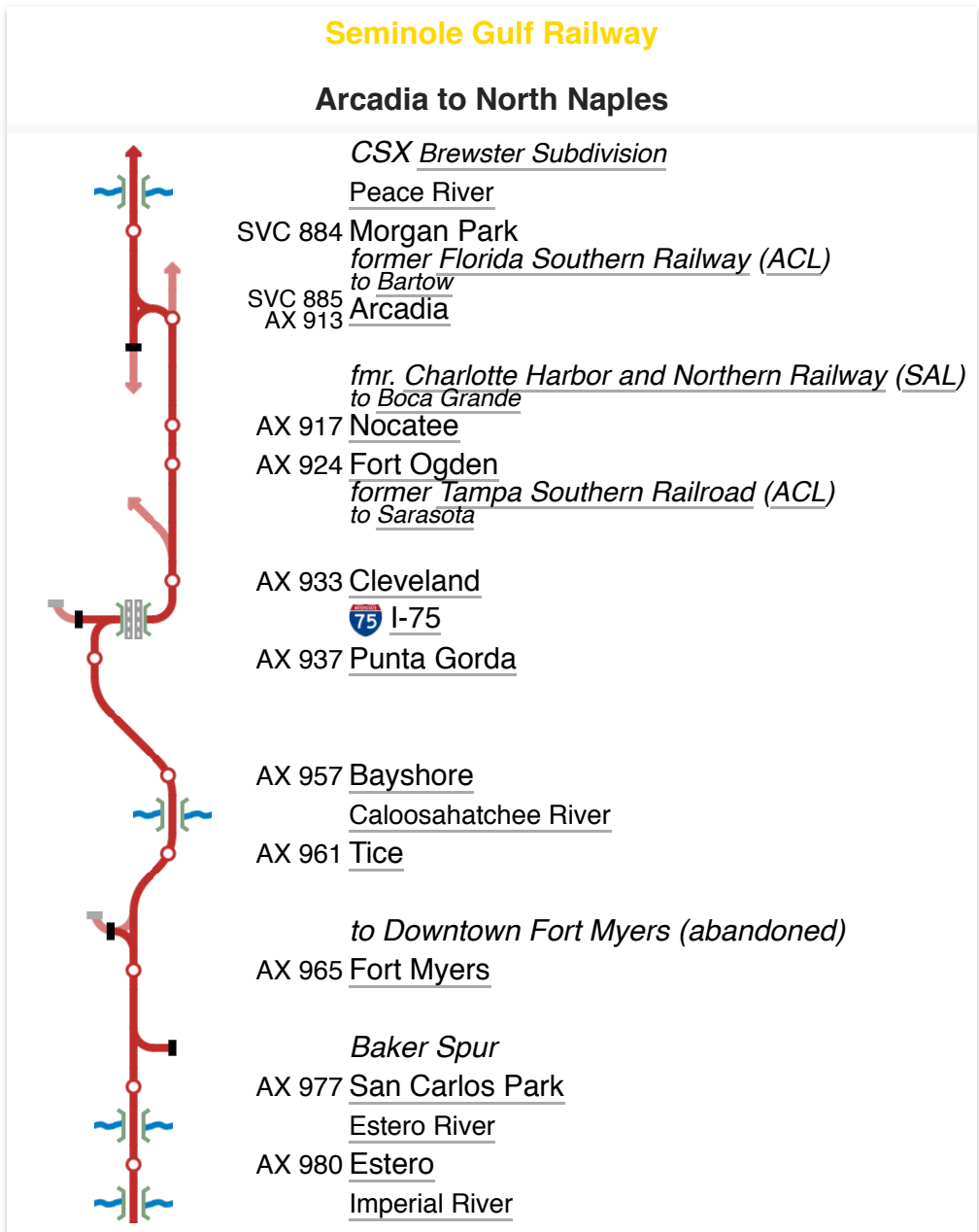
Boulevard in Fort Myers shortly after.<sup>[6]</sup>

## Arcadia to North Naples Line

Seminole Gulf's primary route, which extends nearly 80 miles, begins in Arcadia and runs south to Punta Gorda, Fort Myers, Bonita Springs, and North Naples.

Seminole Gulf's main line begins just north of Arcadia, where it continues south from CSX's Brewster Subdivision (at milepost SVC 880.75)<sup>[7]</sup>. From this point, it briefly runs along the former Charlotte Harbor and Northern/Seaboard Air Line Railroad across the Peace River, passing Morgan Park, and into the Arcadia yard. CSX has trackage rights into Arcadia yard to facilitate the interchange between the two companies.<sup>[8]</sup>

From the yard, the main line continues from a wye southeast a short distance toward Downtown Arcadia before turning south on to the former Florida Southern/Atlantic Coast Line Railroad. It runs south-southwest from Arcadia roughly paralleling the Peace River through Fort



Ogden and Cleveland to Punta Gorda. In Punta Gorda, it turns south and then southeast closely paralleling Interstate 75 towards North Fort Myers before crossing the Caloosahatchee River between there and Tice. The crossing over the Caloosahatchee River includes a drawbridge and series of trestles that traverse Beautiful Island. From Tice on the south side of the river, the line heads southwest



AX 988 Bonita Springs

AX 990 North Naples

AX 992 Vanderbilt Beach (abandoned in 1979)  
*former Seaboard-All Florida Railway (SAL) to Fort Ogden*

AX 1001 Naples (abandoned in 1979)  
East Naples (abandoned in 1944)  
Big Marco River  
Marco Island (abandoned in 1944)

Note: Not to scale



Seminole Gulf freight train crossing Alico Road

towards Downtown Fort Myers. Just east of downtown, the line turns south again through an industrial area. Seminole Gulf's main switching yard in Fort Myers is located underneath the Metro Parkway overpass, and a maintenance yard is just south of Colonial Boulevard next to Page Field.

The line continues south from Fort Myers along the Ten Mile Canal (the John Yarbrough Linear Park parallels the line along the canal). The line has a short spur just north San Carlos Park known as the Baker Spur, which extends west a little over a mile along Alico Road. From San Carlos Park, the main line then heads south through Estero and Downtown Bonita Springs before terminating at Wiggins Pass Road in North Naples, just a mile south of the Lee/Collier County line.

## History

What is now Seminole Gulf Railway's main line came into existence incrementally in the late 1800s and early 20th century.

The northernmost section of the Seminole Gulf track along with the Arcadia yard and the CSX line to the north was originally built by the Charlotte Harbor and Northern Railway. Built from 1907 to 1910, the Charlotte Harbor and Northern Railway (which would later be acquired by the Seaboard Air Line Railroad in 1926) historically extended from Arcadia south to Boca Grande. The line from the Arcadia yard southeast along Pine Street was the Charlotte Harbor and Northern's connecting track to the Florida Southern Railway.

From this point south, Seminole Gulf continues south along the former Florida Southern Railway (a subsidiary of Henry Plant's system of railroads) south to Punta Gorda. This segment was built in 1886 making it the oldest segment of the Seminole Gulf line and was the southernmost segment of the Florida Southern's Charlotte Harbor Division, which originated in Bartow. The original Florida Southern route north of Arcadia (which ran past the historic Arcadia passenger depot) was removed in the early 1980s. Surveying work to determine the route for the Florida Southern Railway to Punta Gorda was done by Punta Gorda civil engineer Albert W. Gilchrist, who would later serve as Florida's 20th governor. The line's first train to Punta Gorda arrived on July 24, 1886. The line, originally built as narrow gauge, was widened to standard gauge in 1892, and the Florida Southern was fully integrated with the Plant System in 1896.<sup>[9]</sup>

In Punta Gorda, the line initially continued west through the city and terminated at a dock facility in the Peace River near Charlotte Harbor. This dock, known as the Long Dock, was located near the Punta Gorda Isles Yacht Club (a mile west of where Fishermen's Village stands today)<sup>[10]</sup>. A passenger depot was also located near King Street (the historic depot on



Taylor Street was built later in 1928). Punta Gorda became the southernmost point the Plant System ever reached, and the railroad's arrival is largely responsible for Punta Gorda's development as a city, which was incorporated four years later. Today, the spur near Elizabeth Street in Punta Gorda is all that remains of the original alignment to the Punta Gorda docks (the Punta Gorda Linear Park today runs along the rest of that route west of US 41).



Seminole Gulf's drawbridge over the Caloosahatchee River just east of Fort Myers at milepost AX 960.

Charlotte Harbor was Henry Plant's ultimate goal and he had no interest in having the line continue south to Fort Myers. Fort Myers was seeking railroad service at the time and had already been established as a city unlike Punta Gorda. After Plant's death in 1899, his heirs would sell his entire system of railroads to the Atlantic Coast Line Railroad in 1902, and serving Fort Myers quickly became a top priority for Atlantic Coast Line president Henry Walters. The extension of the line to Fort Myers via Tice was completed on May 10, 1904, making it the Coast Line's first expansion of the former Plant System. The alignment through Tice was selected so the line would cross the wide Caloosahatchee River farther upstream at Beautiful Island, where less extensive bridge work was needed.<sup>[11]</sup> The extension included a depot at Main and Monroe Streets and a wharf along the Caloosahatchee River at the end of Monroe Street in downtown Fort Myers. The original depot would be replaced with the depot that still stands today on Peck Street (now Widman Way) in 1924, and the wharf would only exist until 1944. The spur that runs from the line just south of State Road 82 is all that remains of the wye and tracks that once served the downtown Fort Myers depot and docks. Fort Myers also experienced major growth after the arrival of the railroad and would remain the southernmost point of the entire Atlantic Coast Line Railroad system until the Florida

land boom of the 1920s.

Once the land boom was underway, the Coast Line partnered with a number of local businessmen including advertising entrepreneur Barron Collier, who owned large amounts of land in the newly-created Collier County. Through this partnership, they acquired the dormant charter of the unbuilt **Fort Myers Southern Railroad**, and the line was extended further south towards Collier County. It reached Bonita Springs by late 1925 where a depot was built just south of the Imperial River (the depot has since been demolished but the depot's platform and siding still remain near Riverside Park).<sup>[12]</sup> The line was further extended to East Naples at a point near the current Naples Airport by December 1926. The Coast Line's original Naples depot was located at the northeast corner of Radio Road and Airport-Pulling Road. The line ultimately reached Collier City on Marco Island in mid 1927. This final extension paralleled the Tamiami Trail to the north from East Naples and then followed the current route of State Road 951 to Marco Island.



Seminole Gulf track through Downtown Bonita Springs. The platform is all that remains of the Atlantic Coast Line's passenger depot.

The line initially went through East Naples because the Coast Line's main competitor, the Seaboard Air Line Railroad, had quietly secured a more favorable right of way into downtown Naples (along the present route of Goodlette-Frank Road). They were simultaneously building their Seaboard-All Florida Railway from Fort Ogden to Fort Myers and Naples. Seaboard's service to Naples commenced eleven days after the Coast Line.

The rival Seaboard discontinued service to Naples in 1942, which allowed the Atlantic Coast Line to serve downtown Naples by acquiring the southernmost 7 miles of their former right-of-way. The Seaboard's route was connected to the Coast Line's track at a point just east of Vanderbilt Beach, and by 1944, all Naples passenger service was relocated to the Seaboard's former passenger depot on Fifth Avenue South. Once the main route was shifted into downtown Naples, service to Marco Island was discontinued, and the original route through East Naples to Marco Island was removed.

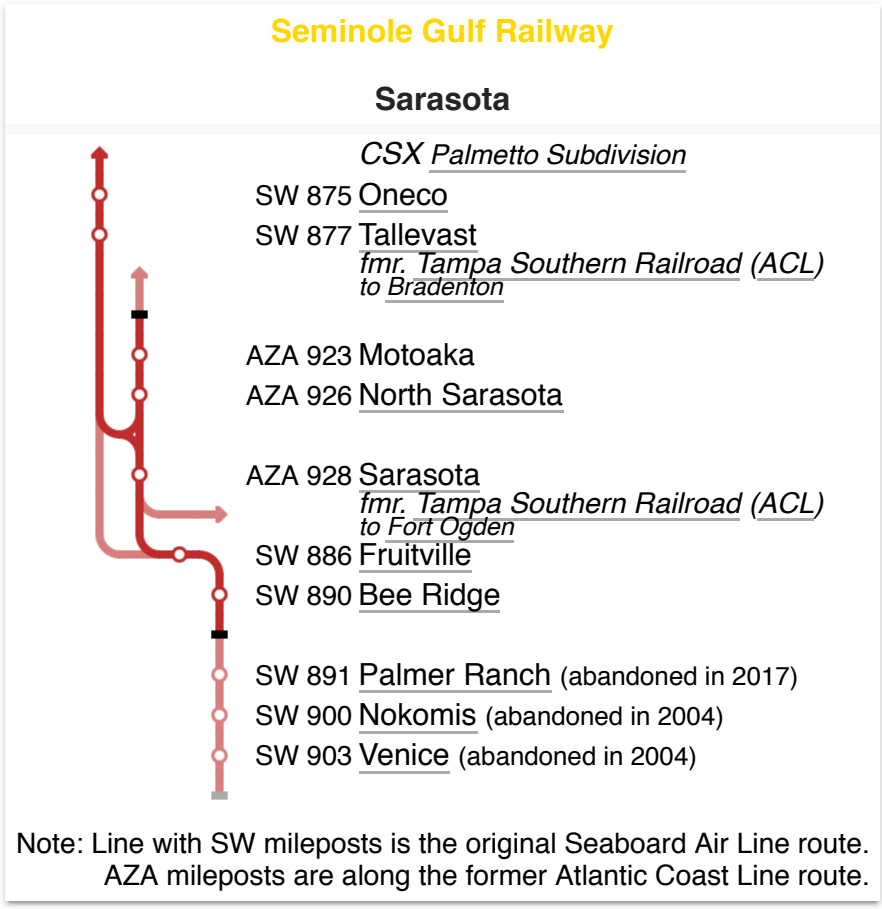
The Atlantic Coast Line became the Seaboard Coast Line Railroad in 1967. The Baker Spur just north of San Carlos Park was then built in 1973. The Baker Spur would extend beyond the route of Interstate 75 to serve rock mines in eastern Lee County on land owned by the Atlantic Land and Improvement Company (known today as Alico, Inc.), which at one point had been a subsidiary of the Atlantic Coast Line Railroad and was the holding company for its real estate division. Seminole Gulf abandoned the easternmost three miles of the Baker Spur in 1994.<sup>[13]</sup>

Intercity passenger service to Southwest Florida was discontinued in 1971 upon the creation of Amtrak, who opted not to serve Southwest Florida. In 1979, tracks into downtown Naples were removed when the line was cut back to its current terminus in North Naples, a year before Seaboard Coast Line would become CSX (nine years before Seminole Gulf would begin operating it).<sup>[14]</sup>

## Sarasota Line

In Sarasota, Seminole Gulf largely operates on a u-shaped line. The northwest end of the line is located just south of Bradenton in Oneco, where it continues south from CSX's Palmetto Subdivision. The interchange point is located a little over a mile south of CSX's Tropicana Yard. From Oneco, the line heads due south along former Seaboard Air Line Railroad tracks towards Sarasota, passing through Tallevast and close to Sarasota-Bradenton International Airport. Just north of Downtown Sarasota, the line turns east onto former Atlantic Coast Line Railroad tracks and comes to a wye just east of US 301. From the wye, the line turns back north along the former Atlantic Coast Line main line and terminates just south of Whitfield Avenue in Motoaka.

From the wye at the southeast corner of the line, track also continues south-southeast through Fruitville to Bee Ridge which is currently out of service south of Fruitville Road and is in the process of being abandoned.<sup>[15]</sup> This line went as far south as Venice when Seminole Gulf began operating it and was abandoned south of Palmer Ranch in 2004 with the popular Legacy Trail now running on the former right of way. Sarasota County plans to extend the Legacy Trail north to Fruitville Road when that segment of the line is abandoned in late 2019.<sup>[16][17]</sup>



## History

The first trackage of the Sarasota line to be built was built by the Seaboard Air Line (through their Florida West Shore Railway subsidiary) in 1903. It was part of a line that extended from Durant (just east of Tampa), to Sarasota via Parrish, Palmetto and Bradenton. Some of the line ran along the former route of the Arcadia, Gulf Coast and Lakeland Railroad, an earlier unsuccessful railroad between Bradenton and Sarasota.<sup>[14]</sup> In Downtown Sarasota, the tracks originally continued south along Lemon Avenue and served a dock facility in Sarasota Bay. In 1905, Seaboard extended the line east into Fruitville, which initially ran southeast along Pineapple Avenue and then east along what is now Alderman Street and Brother Geenen Way. In 1911, at the request of local socialite Bertha Honoré Palmer, the line was extended south to Venice.

The Atlantic Coast Line came to the area later in 1924 as part of the Florida land boom when they built the Tampa Southern Railroad, which up until 1949 continued southeast as far as Fort Ogden (along the Peace River), where it merged with the Coast Line's route to Fort Myers (which is today, coincidentally, Seminole Gulf's Arcadia to North Naples line). The Seaboard and the Coast Line tracks originally ran directly beside each other on the east-west segment through Fruitville. Spurs connected both lines to the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus's Sarasota headquarters near Fruitville (which existed from 1927 to 1959, when the headquarters were relocated to the end of the line in Venice).

In 1967, the Seaboard Air Line and the Atlantic Coast Line merged to form the Seaboard Coast Line Railroad (who later merged with the Chessie System in the 1980s to form CSX). The mergers brought the all of the track under a single owner and led to consolidation of the two routes and abandonment of redundant trackage. This included the Seaboard's original route through downtown Sarasota, the Coast Line's tracks between Bradenton and Matoaka, and the consolidation of the east-west parallel track through Fruitville to a single track (using the former Seaboard track).<sup>[14]</sup>

After taking over the line in 1987, Seminole Gulf continued to carry the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus to their Venice headquarters up until 1990. The circus then relocated to Tampa mainly due to the fact that the Venice segment could no longer support their rail equipment due to the rough condition of the track.<sup>[18]</sup> Around 2004, Seminole Gulf and CSX collectively abandoned Venice segment of the line and truncated it at Palmer Ranch. The former right of way of the Venice segment is now the popular Legacy Trail.

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## External links

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- Official website (<http://www.semigulf.com/>)
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