

# REFLECTIONS

FROM CENTRAL FLORIDA  
THE MAGAZINE OF THE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF CENTRAL FLORIDA



## COMMODORE ROSE AND THE RIVER OF FREEDOM

SPRING 2024  
VOL. 22 NO. 1



*The Historical Society's mission is to serve as the gateway for community engagement, education, and inspiration by preserving and sharing Central Florida's continually unfolding story.*

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*Unless otherwise noted, all archival images in this issue are from the Historical Society's collection at the History Center.*



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 *The History Center is accessible with elevators on every floor.*

**FROM THE DIRECTOR**

**HELP US TELL OUR STORIES BETTER**

In early December last year, the History Center debuted enhancements to its core exhibitions, which have been in place since the museum opened in 2000. We've worked hard on these improvements, which include increased bilingual content, use of more accurate and appropriate language, and new interactive components.

Throughout the fourth floor of the museum, visitors can now explore the language of some of Central Florida's native people, the Timucua. Captivating animations projected across the exhibition's skyscape share the history of centuries of conflict across our state. A hands-on interactive display invites museumgoers to activate a large screen that shows the science of how sinkholes occur, and how they may have even had an impact during the time of the woolly mammoth.

Visitors to the History Center can also look for fresh narratives popping up across all our galleries. In our historic courtroom, for example, text panels now share stories of cases that were tried there, including the story of Lenny Randle, a Black professional baseball player whose 1977 trial in Orlando after an altercation with his manager became a national event. Additionally, text panels throughout the museum are gradually being updated to bilingual content. Since 2016, the History Center's special exhibitions have been presented in both English and Spanish, including the nationally award-winning *Figurehead: Music & Mayhem in Orlando's Underground*, currently on display.

In making these essential improvements, financial support from the community is vital. You can help us to achieve our mission of serving as the gateway for community engagement, education, and inspiration by preserving and sharing Central Florida's continually unfolding story. If you donate to the History Center this spring through the



United Arts Collaborative Campaign for the Arts, your donation will be matched by 15 percent. The Collaborative Campaign for the Arts is a fundraising effort coordinated by United Arts in partnership with arts and cultural organizations in Central Florida. The only one of its kind, the Collaborative Campaign infuses millions into arts and culture each year. The campaign concludes April 30.

Another way to support our work is through membership. Our members experience the best of the History Center and also support our role as the heart of our community's history. Benefits include unlimited admission, private exhibition previews, free or discounted prices for programs, and so much more. You can gain free admission at hundreds of museums throughout the country via reciprocal programs available at different membership levels. If you have inadvertently let your membership lapse, I encourage you to renew it today. It is an important piece of supporting our work here. ■

– Pamela Schwartz, Executive Director, Orange County Regional History Center

**ABOUT THE COVER**

This stereograph view from the studio of Underwood and Underwood shows the occupants of an Ocklawaha River steamer, circa 1870. During Florida's golden age of steamboats in the late 19th century, visitors from the North toured the St. Johns River between Jacksonville and Sanford, as well as the river's tributaries like the Ocklawaha. Black crewmen and waitstaff helped operate the vessels through waterways that would be treacherous for an inexperienced pilot. Photo courtesy of the State Archives of Florida.

## CONTRIBUTORS



### EMILY COUGHLAN

Emily Coughlan holds a bachelor's degree in Art History from Lebanon Valley College and a master's in Museum Studies from the University of Leicester. She has nearly 10 years of curatorial and collections experience, has worked on numerous exhibitions and collections projects throughout her career, and is currently the collections manager at the History Center.



### RICK KILBY

Rick Kilby is the managing editor and designer of *Reflections*, as well as the author of two award-winning books, *Florida's Healing Waters: Gilded Age Mineral Springs, Seaside Resorts, and Health Spas* (2020) and *Finding the Fountain of Youth: Ponce de León and Florida's Magical Waters* (2013).



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### TANA MOSIER PORTER

Orlando historian Tana Mosier Porter worked for 11 years in the Brechner Research Center answering questions and assisting researchers. "With every question I answered I learned something new." She is now retired but still researching, writing, and learning.



### STEVE RAJTAR

Steve Rajtar now lives in the Pacific Northwest after many years in Orlando. Steve led historic walking tours in Central Florida, has written many books about Central Florida history, and co-authored several with his wife, Gayle, as well as co-writing a history column for *Winter Park* magazine.

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### *Reflections from Central Florida*

The magazine of the Historical Society of Central Florida Inc. focuses on the Florida counties included within the History Center's mission: Orange, Osceola, Seminole, Volusia, Lake, Brevard, and Polk. The History Center is located at 65 East Central Boulevard, Orlando, FL 32801. Visit our website at [TheHistoryCenter.org](http://TheHistoryCenter.org)

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**The Joseph L. Brechner Research Center** was created through a donation from the late Marion Brody Brechner in honor of her husband, Joseph (1915-1990), an award-winning journalist, community leader, and freedom-of-information advocate. Materials available for research include prints and photographs, archives and manuscripts, architectural drawings and records, books, and other published materials pertaining to Central Florida history. The Brechner Research Center is located on the fifth floor of the Orange County Regional History Center and is free to the public by appointment. We welcome scholars, students, genealogists, filmmakers, journalists, and the general public to conduct research by appointment during our visiting hours.

# History HAPPENS HERE

ORANGE COUNTY REGIONAL  
**HISTORY CENTER**

DOWNTOWN ORLANDO

[TheHistoryCenter.org/events](https://TheHistoryCenter.org/events)



## **HISTORY ALIVE**

Each month visitors engage with history through enhanced interactive experiences and themed hands-on activities the whole family can enjoy.



## **LUNCH & LEARN**

Join us each month at noon, in-person or online, for a different, interesting program about Central Florida history, the museum, and more.



## **THIRD THURSDAYS**

The best-kept secret in Orlando! The History Center is open late on the third Thursday of each month with free admission from 5 to 8 p.m.



## **SENSORY SUNDAYS**

On the second Sunday of the month, join us for some sensory-friendly family fun at this program presented in partnership with Autism Society of Greater Orlando. Supported by Disney.



# THROUGH THE CAMERA LENS

From the photo archives of the Historical Society of Central Florida

If you have photos you would like to donate to our collection, please contact Travis Puterbaugh at 407-836-8584 or [Travis.Puterbaugh@ocfl.net](mailto:Travis.Puterbaugh@ocfl.net).



## Apple Annie's and Nostalgic Fantasy

In 1985, Lee Pharr, the art director for Church Street Station, said, “We’re trying to create an ambiance here that’s almost nostalgic fantasy.”

The downtown Orlando entertainment complex – which opened on July 19, 1974, and helped transform downtown Orlando’s reputation as a daytime and business-only destination – evoked a strong sense of nostalgia with its varied 1880s-1920s themed restaurants and bars set along a quaint downtown block featuring cobblestone and gas lamps.

One of the many Church Street Station venues where one could hear live music, Apple Annie’s played host to an array of bluegrass and folk music performances, including the well-regarded house band Mother’s Choice. Located in the old Leon Building next to Rosie O’Grady’s Goodtime Emporium, Apple Annie’s opened as part of the second phase of Church Street Station’s development in July 1976.

The interior of Apple Annie’s – think grand Victorian garden – featured 12-foot, 18th-century hand-carved mirrors from Austria, four brass chandeliers (each 1,000 pounds) salvaged from an Episcopal church in Buffalo, and arched pine and cypress trusses salvaged from Annunciation Catholic Church in New Orleans. The front bar incorporated an 18th-century communion rail from a Catholic church in France. Surrounded by 20 varieties of tropical plants, guests in Apple Annie’s sat in wicker peacock chairs and reconstructed church pews at English-style pub tables.

The ambiance was often described as “gentility at its finest,” and Church Street Station founder Bob Snow spared no expense in providing the finest in furnishings from around the world, boasting that there were no reproductions in Apple Annie’s. The atmosphere, décor, and vibe of Apple Annie’s is one that has yet to – and may never be – replicated in downtown Orlando. ■

# COMMODORE ROSE AND THE RIVER OF FREEDOM

BY RICK KILBY

Who Was Commodore Rose in Pioneer Florida?” reads a February 1975 headline for Marian Godown’s “Here’s Florida” feature in the Fort Myers *News-Press*. Godown invited readers to take a quickie quiz: was the Commodore the owner of a steamboat line, an “ex-Yankee” steamer captain, or a Black “steamboat stewardess”?

The last choice was in fact the answer. Commodore Rose’s tale is one of the few known stories of countless formerly enslaved people who found their freedom via the tannin-stained waters of the St. Johns River. Sadly, the histories of people of color have, until recently, been largely ignored, whereas a good deal more has been written about Rose’s former owner, Captain Jacob Brock (sometimes spelled Broch).

While Godown and others have written about “Commodore” or

“Admiral” Rose in more contemporary media, just two primary accounts about Rose survive from the period in which she lived – the 19th century. One was written by Harriett Beecher Stowe, the famed author of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, who had a winter home in Florida.

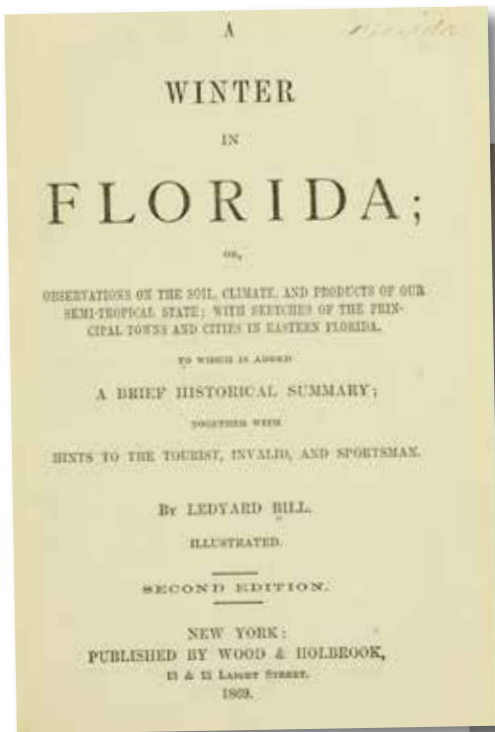
“When the magnolia-flowers were beginning to blossom, we were ready, and took passage – a joyous party of eight or ten individuals – on the steamer ‘Darlington,’ commanded by Capt. Broch, and, as is often asserted, by ‘Commodore Rose,” Stowe writes in *Palmetto-Leaves*, a collection of articles published in 1873. “This latter [Rose], in this day of woman’s rights, is no mean example of female energy and vigor,” comments Stowe, whose articles were designed to encourage her sympathetic northern readers to visit and perhaps even relocate to the Sunshine State.

The second mention of Rose appears in author Ledyard Bill’s 1869 travel guide, *Winter in Florida*, in which Bill observed that Captain Brock may have sailed the boat, but “Admiral Rose” was in actual command. “Her every word of command might be heard ringing out sharp and clear above the noise and confusion at every landing,” Bill writes, concluding that Rose’s orders were “instantly executed by every officer below captain.”

A strong supporter of the Union cause, Bill moved from Louisville, Kentucky, to New York at the start of the Civil War. He later relocated to Massachusetts, where in addition to publishing and writing he became active in politics. Both Stowe and Bill were northern abolitionists who had incentive to promote Rose’s larger-than-life persona.



UNIONISTS GREETING THE FEDERAL STEAMER DARLINGTON ON ITS WAY TO SAVE JACKSONVILLE, FLA. FROM A SKETCH BY AN OFFICER OF THE OTTAWA. Matheson History Museum



Above: Title page of Ledyard Bill's *A Winter in Florida*.

### THE CUSSIN' CAPTAIN

While Rose is only mentioned in these two books, 19th-century descriptions of the *Darlington's* captain, Jacob Brock, are common. Today he is often portrayed as one of the founders of the historic Central Florida town of Enterprise and a pioneer in tourism on the St. Johns River. Colorful depictions of Brock often note that he was short in stature and displayed an affinity for foul language. He delighted in startling his passengers with a surprise blast of the ship's steam whistle while engaging them in story.

Born in Vermont and raised as a "river rat" on the Connecticut River, Brock spent his early adult life in Hartford, Connecticut, where he operated a machine shop, according to Volusia County historian Lani Friend. A critical travelogue called *Letters from the Slave States* asserts that Brock worked as an "engineer plying the Charleston waters" in South Carolina before "scraping together a few dollars" to purchase a "small, worn-out steamer." The author of this biased book, published in London four years before the start of the Civil War, notes that Brock had "no qualms on the subject on 'involuntary servitude' always providing that it

Below: Stowe's "The Grand Tour Up River" chapter of *Palmetto Leaves*.



pays." One of Brock's passengers left a more forgiving testimonial, noting that he was a "rough spoken man, but a kinder-hearted or more genial man never walked a deck or told a story."

### THE RICHLAND EXPLOSION

In her narrative about Rose in *Palmetto Leaves*, Stowe disclosed that Rose was once a slave owned by Captain Brock who had been emancipated for her "courage, and presence of mind, in

saving his life in a steamboat disaster."

It could have happened when Brock captained the steamer *Richland* on South Carolina's Pee Dee River, transporting freight between Charleston and Cheraw, an important hub in the production of cotton. According to newspaper accounts, both of the *Richland's* boilers exploded and the boat caught fire, burning to the "surface of the water" on Jan. 14, 1849. Boiler explosions on steamboats were so commonplace in the decade between 1830 and 1840 that after nearly 2,000 deaths, the United States Congress passed an act mandating inspection of steamboat boilers "to provide better security of the lives of the passengers."

Casualties on the *Richland* may have risen as high as 15 and included both white passengers and the Black crew. Brock was in the pilothouse when the explosion occurred but survived due to the "exertions" of a stewardess, according to news reports.

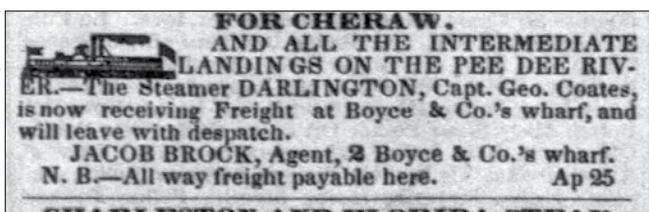
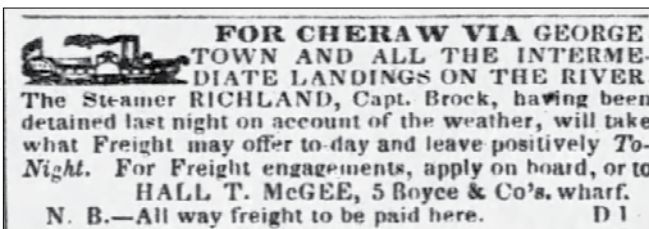
A ship's steward, or in this case stewardess, was a crew member who served the needs of guests and crew as well as ensuring the vessel was clean and orderly. Black workers, both free and enslaved, often served in various roles on riverboats. It is quite possible that Rose was the *Richland* crew member who pulled Brock to shore after the 1849 explosion in these accounts.



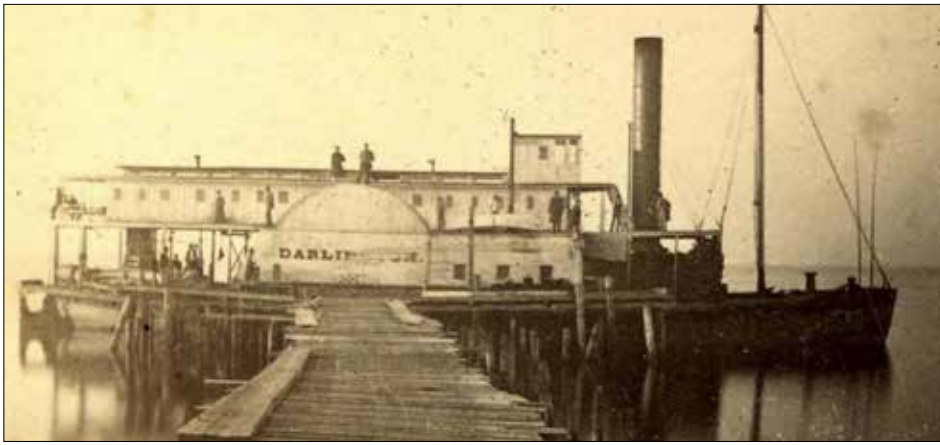
State Archives of Florida

The Charleston Daily Courier

The Charleston Daily Courier



Above, left: Jacob Brock, ca. 1900. Above right: Charleston, South Carolina, newspaper ads for Brock's steamers *Richland* and *Darlington*.



Photograph from a stereograph slide of the steamer *Darlington*.

### THE STEAMER DARLINGTON

Brock had a new vessel before the end of that year, and newspaper advertisements pronounced that the captain would transport any light freight up the Pee Dee River aboard the “new light draught steamer DARLINGTON.”

Built in a Charleston shipyard, Brock’s new vessel initially hauled cargo between Charleston and Cheraw. It was a sidewheel steamer made of wood that could hold up to 40 passengers on the upper deck. There were two saloons onboard for passengers, the larger of which doubled as a dining room. By 1853, the *Darlington* initiated service transporting passengers and goods between Jacksonville and Palatka on the St. Johns River.

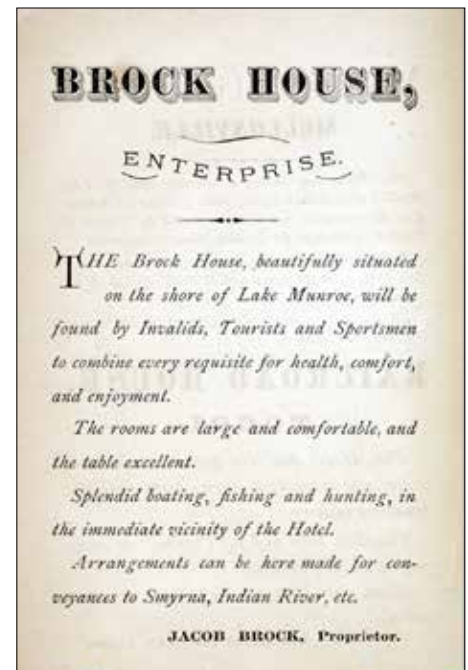
An 1854 advertisement in the *Charleston Daily Courier* announced that Captain Brock was commencing service to Enterprise on the north

shore of Lake Monroe and “all the intermediate landings on the St. Johns” from the towns of Palatka and Welaka.

According to *Volusia: The West Side*, Brock purchased land in Enterprise in 1852 and by 1855 built a substantial steamboat wharf on the north side of Lake Monroe, where he would also build his hotel, the Brock House. “Captain Brock foresaw the possibilities of tourist travel for the little-known lands about Lake Monroe,” write authors James Branch Cabell and A.J. Hanna in their 1943 volume, *The St. Johns: A Parade of Diversities*, and he built a “neat inn for the entertainment of his steamboat passengers.” The comfortable New England-style hotel opened for guests in the winter of 1856. The wood-frame building was as far south as many Gilded Age visitors would venture into Florida, and Brock’s steamboats were initially the primary transportation

to this still untamed part of the state. Brock owned the hotel until 1876.

Over the years the Brock House would be expanded and host presidents (U.S. Grant and Rutherford B. Hayes), Vanderbilts and Rockefellers, and even artist Winslow Homer. Guests were well taken care of by Black porters, maids, and cooks, many of whom lived in nearby Garfield, a Black community composed of formerly enslaved people. The town slowly disappeared after the great freeze at the end of the nineteenth century that wiped out much of the region’s citrus, but the population of freedmen and women was at one time larger than that of Enterprise, according to the Enterprise Museum.



Advertisement for the Brock House.



Undated photo of the Brock House.



Undated photo of Black workers on a steamer.

### SLAVERY IN EAST FLORIDA

People fled slavery at South Carolina and Georgia plantations in the 18th and early 19th centuries, knowing that they might live free in La Florida when it was under Spanish rule. Fort Mose, established in 1738 by formerly enslaved people, was the first free Black community in North America. However, during Florida’s two decades of British rule from 1763 to 1783, plantations arose along the St. Johns River that utilized enslaved individuals as labor. Two well-known Central Florida examples include the Beresford plantation, which famed naturalist



William Bartram visited in 1766, and the Spring Garden plantation at what is now De Leon Springs State Park.

During the Seminole Wars (1816-1858), Black people who had escaped slavery in Florida joined Seminoles to fight against U.S. military forces and white settlers. These Black and Seminole forces overwhelmed five plantations along the St. Johns River, freeing the enslaved laborers who then also united with the Seminoles. Perhaps as many as 300 enslaved people were liberated from the Spring Garden plantation.

The collective's work also documented that the plantation's last owner, Thomas Starke, enlisted Jacob Brock to transport enslaved individuals. Historian Lani Friend's research revealed that between 1856 and 1858, Brock transported 33 enslaved people between the ages of 6 and 50 between Savannah and Jacksonville. The 1860 Slave Schedule for Volusia County shows that Brock also owned 11 unnamed enslaved individuals, including a 40-year-old woman that could possibly be Rose.

## THE RIVER CALLS TO FREEDOM SEEKERS

Florida entered the Union in 1845 as a slave state. In her book *Slavery and Plantation Growth in Antebellum Florida, 1821-1860*, Julia Floyd Smith asserts that enslaved people escaped from Florida by "traveling east along the St. Johns River to Jacksonville, where they boarded a vessel heading for a northern port." She notes that in 1854 an act was passed "to provide for the regulation of vessels in the St. Johns River area and to insure a more diligent search for runaway slaves."

When the Civil War began in 1861, Florida was the third state to secede. Its population was about 140,400, of which 44 percent were enslaved. Although Brock was born a northerner, he had made his fortune in the South, and he had a significant financial commitment in Florida. As a result, the captain allowed two of the four steamboats in his fleet, the *Darlington* and *Hattie*, to be utilized by the Confederacy.

Brock was at the helm of the *Darlington*, helping to evacuate residents of the north Florida town of Fernandina before Union troops arrived in 1862 when he was caught by Federal forces. "There were passengers, including women and children, aboard the *Darlington*, and yet the brutal captain suffered her to be fired upon, and refused to hoist the white flag notwithstanding the entreaties of the women," read the Union officer's report published in northern papers, "I send the Captain of the steamer home a prisoner," the officer wrote. Brock spent the remainder of the war in Union prisons.



Enterprise Museum

Above: Copies of manifests for the transport of enslaved individuals aboard the steamer *Darlington*, from the archives of the Enterprise Museum.

As part of the Public History Research Collective led by Stetson University's visiting assistant professor of history Andy Eisen, incarcerated researchers from the Tomoka Correctional Institution in Daytona Beach discovered new information on enslavement at Spring Garden. The project unearthed the names of more than 230 people who were enslaved at Spring Garden in the mid-1800s and, in 2021, produced an exhibition, "Slavery and the Struggle for Freedom in East Florida," that listed those names.

Right: Commemorative envelope celebrating the *Darlington's* brief status as a U.S. Navy vessel after it was captured from Brock during the Civil War.



Courtesy Rick Kilby

## TRANSPORTING FREEDMEN AND FREEDWOMEN

After the war's conclusion, Brock regained his two captured steamboats and resumed operations on the river. Ironically the decks of the *Darlington*, once used to transport enslaved people to Florida, were now used to transport the newly emancipated to the Freedmen's Bureau in Magnolia, just north of Green Cove Springs on the St. Johns River. In 1866 the Freedmen's Bureau utilized the Magnolia Hotel as a hospital and orphanage but found the roads too primitive for moving patients. Brock, who had a residence in nearby Middleburg, was hired to bring patients and supplies to the facility.

Educator and reformer Chloe Merrick Reed purchased the mansion of Confederate General Joseph Finnegan in Fernandina for just \$25 at a tax auction in 1864 to use as an orphanage. She was forced to move the orphans to a new location, however, after Finnegan regained his home two years later. The children were relocated to the Magnolia Freedmen's Bureau, likely via the *Darlington*. By 1868 the Magnolia Hotel was returned to its original owner, and the orphans were placed in foster homes.

Land along the St. Johns River was also promised to freedmen as part of General William T. Sherman's Special Field Order No. 15, commonly known as the "40 acres and a mule" policy. This 1865 edict was a settlement to allow emancipated individuals the opportunity to work the land until they had earned enough to pay the government the value of the property. Sadly, the order was rescinded a few months later by President Andrew Johnson after President Abraham Lincoln's assassination.

## FLORIDA'S GOLDEN AGE OF STEAMBOATS

Brock's hunch about the profitability of steamboat travel up and down the St. Johns River proved prophetic, as northern tourists streamed into Jacksonville after the war and booked passage on steamers from a growing list of competitors. "During the 'season,' boats continually run from Jacksonville to Enterprise, and back again; the round trip being made for a moderate sum, and giving, in a very easy and comparatively inexpensive manner, as much of the peculiar scenery as mere tourists care to see," reported Harriet Beecher Stowe.

THE OLD RELIABLE  
**BROCK'S LINE OF STEAMERS,**  
 RUNNING BETWEEN  
 Jacksonville and Enterprise,  
 ON THE  
**ST. JOHN'S RIVER, FLORIDA.**

THE NEW AND ELEGANT PASSENGER STEAMER  
**FLORENCE**

Leaves JACKSONVILLE daily (except Sundays) for PALATKA and all INTERMEDIATE POINTS, and connecting with Steamers for ENTERPRISE, CLAY SPRINGS, SALT LAKE, DUNN'S LAKE, and points on the OCKLAWAHA RIVER. At TOCOPI with ST. JOHN'S RAILROAD for ST. AUGUSTINE, and returning to Jacksonville same evening in time to connect with all Northern Trains.

THE FAVORITE STEAMERS  
 "DARLINGTON" and "HATTIE"

Leave JACKSONVILLE on SUNDAYS and WEDNESDAYS at 9 A. M., RUNNING THROUGH TO ENTERPRISE, and stopping at all principal points on the River.

The Old Reputation of this Popular Line will be fully sustained, and every Comfort Guaranteed to its Patrons.

**JACOB BROCK, Agent,**  
 Jacksonville, Fla.



West Volusia Historical Society



State Archives of Florida



State Archives of Florida

Above: Abolitionist Chloe Merrick Reed was married to Harrison Reed, ninth governor of Florida (1868-1873). Above, right: The home of Confederate General Joseph Finnegan was used as an orphanage by Merrick after the Civil War. Right: Illustration of the *DeBary*, one of Frederick deBary's steamship fleet that traveled the St. Johns River. Top, right: Ad for Brock's steamers; Brock House guests on the hotel's pier.



Hubbard Hart, like Brock was also born in Vermont, transported passengers (including Stowe) up the Ocklawaha River to Silver Springs on his line of steamers. Frederick deBary, who Brock assisted in setting up his Lake Monroe estate, established his own line of first-class steamboats. But the prosperity of this age was not available to everyone.

Despite the short-term success of all-Black communities such as Garfield, racial issues still persisted in the region. Henry Sanford, whose namesake town absorbed the settlement of Mellonville on the opposite side of Lake Monroe, recruited workers from Sweden to labor in his citrus groves after "armed white vigilantes attacked the camp of Sanford's workers." Surviving Black workers fled, never to return, wrote author Mark Derr in *Some Kind of Paradise*. It is into this environment that the triumphant story of Rose emerges.

## A PORTRAIT BEYOND STEREOTYPES

*Orlando Sentinel* history columnist Jim Robison wrote that Rose’s last name eludes historians, but the “folklore lives on from the travelers” who saw and heard her speak the “final word in her every tone and gesture” during St. Johns River steamboat journeys. Ledyard Bill gives a thorough account of her physical appearance, noting that she was “a stout-built athlete of two hundred pounds of medium height, a full piercing eye, regular features, and with a particularly commanding voice.”

The positive portrayal of Rose by Stowe and Bill is unusual, in that most travel literature of the period presented Southerners – both Black and white – in pejorative descriptions,

using broken dialect that reinforced ugly stereotypes. “What Stowe and Bill did,” suggests historian Joy Wallace Dickinson, “is give dignity to a person who might often be reduced to a caricature.” Lani Friend, who has done extensive research on both Rose and Brock, wrote and produced a play that examines the relationship between these two historical characters that is based on Stowe’s account of her visit to Enterprise.

Brock’s luck would run out, and he would declare bankruptcy in 1877. He died a short time later in Jacksonville. The Brock House hotel was renamed the Epworth Inn early in the 20th century, and the property would become part of the Methodist Children’s Home, an orphanage established in 1908 and still open today. Now the only steamboat operating regularly on the St. Johns

is a replica that offers dinner cruises from the Port of Sanford. Brock’s legacy endures, however, in the name of one of the main streets in the unincorporated hamlet of Enterprise: Jacob Brock Avenue.

Of all the enslaved people who found freedom on the St. Johns River, Commodore Rose stands alone as perhaps the best known, yet many details of her life remain obscure. Lani Friend and the staff of the Enterprise Museum continue the search for more information. “According to writers of the time,” Friend writes, Rose was “strong, skilled at her work, [and] resilient, as anyone in her situation in life would have had to be. . . . She might have made a great CEO today, keeping a big company afloat and navigating the shoals of the modern economy. . . . She survived, endured, and transcended all.” ■

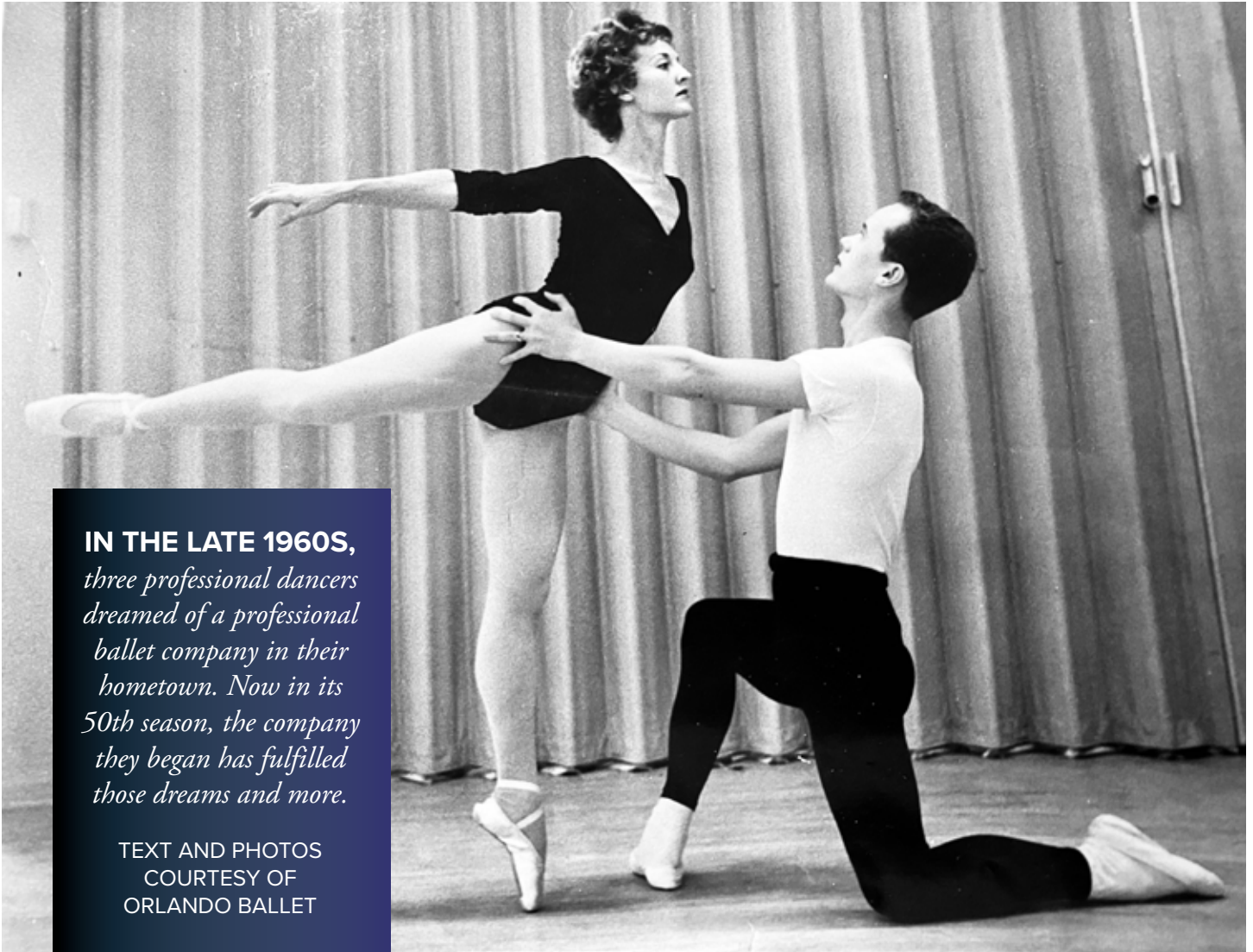


Courtesy Lani Friend

Top left: A stylized drawing depicts Commodore Rose in *The St. Johns: A Parade of Diversities* (1943) by Branch Cabell and A.J. Hanna. Bottom left: The Brock House staff in an undated photo from the Enterprise Museum’s archives. Above: Actors from Lani Friend’s 2013 play, *A Grand Tour Upriver with Jacob Brock and Commodore Rose*.

# DANCING THROUGH TIME

*with the Orlando Ballet*



**IN THE LATE 1960S,**  
*three professional dancers  
dreamed of a professional  
ballet company in their  
hometown. Now in its  
50th season, the company  
they began has fulfilled  
those dreams and more.*

TEXT AND PHOTOS  
COURTESY OF  
ORLANDO BALLET

**T**he story of Orlando Ballet – ranked today as one of the top 20 professional ballet companies in the country – carries as much emotion, drama, joy, talent, and triumph as *Giselle*, *The Sleeping Beauty*, and *Swan Lake* all rolled into one spectacular production.

It all began in the late 1960s when professional ballet dancers Kip Watson, his wife Patti Watson, and his sister, Barbara Riggins, left successful stage careers in New York with the purpose of creating a professional

dance company and school in Orlando, their hometown. They were products of the locally legendary Royal Dance Academy, founded in the late 1940s by Edith and Bill Royal, and their aim was to build upon the foundation established by the Royals.

## **“WE CAN DO THIS”**

With no formal business training, Kip Watson relied as much on his lifetime of professional training and experience as he did on his instincts. “Dance was his passion,” said former dancer Eliza

Harwood-Watson, Kip’s second wife and widow. “They all believed ‘we can do this.’” Longtime ballet supporter Dr. Matt Gay, who knew the three founders, noted, “There would be no Orlando Ballet without Kip.”

The trio shared the monumental workload and pressures that come with any startup – Kip Watson as executive director, general manager, choreographer, and dancer; Patti Watson as teacher, dancer, and choreographer; and Barbara Riggins as artistic director, talent coordinator,

and teacher, among the myriad of other tasks required to keep the doors open. Kip and Barbara's mother, Phyllis Watson, helped with administrative chores and made all the costumes. Over the course of time, the founders' children trained and performed with the company as well.

While Kip Watson, who died in 2011, is remembered for his relentless drive and business focus, Barbara, who died in 2020, is remembered for her desire for more "cutting-edge" choreography to challenge the dancers and audiences. "The ballet was her baby; she loved it just as much as she loved her children," Eliza Harwood-Watson recalls.

For years, the founding trio worked 16-hour days, building the artistry and the business – in some cases, literally. Kip Watson and others actually constructed one of their first studio locations. Each taught anywhere from six to eight classes daily, usually working late into the night building students' skills and confidence as well as the company's reputation.

The first few years have been described as "lean." The staff sometimes identified themselves as "gypsies" because of their many relocations between Winter Park and Orlando as they worked to find a home suitable for a dance studio and school.

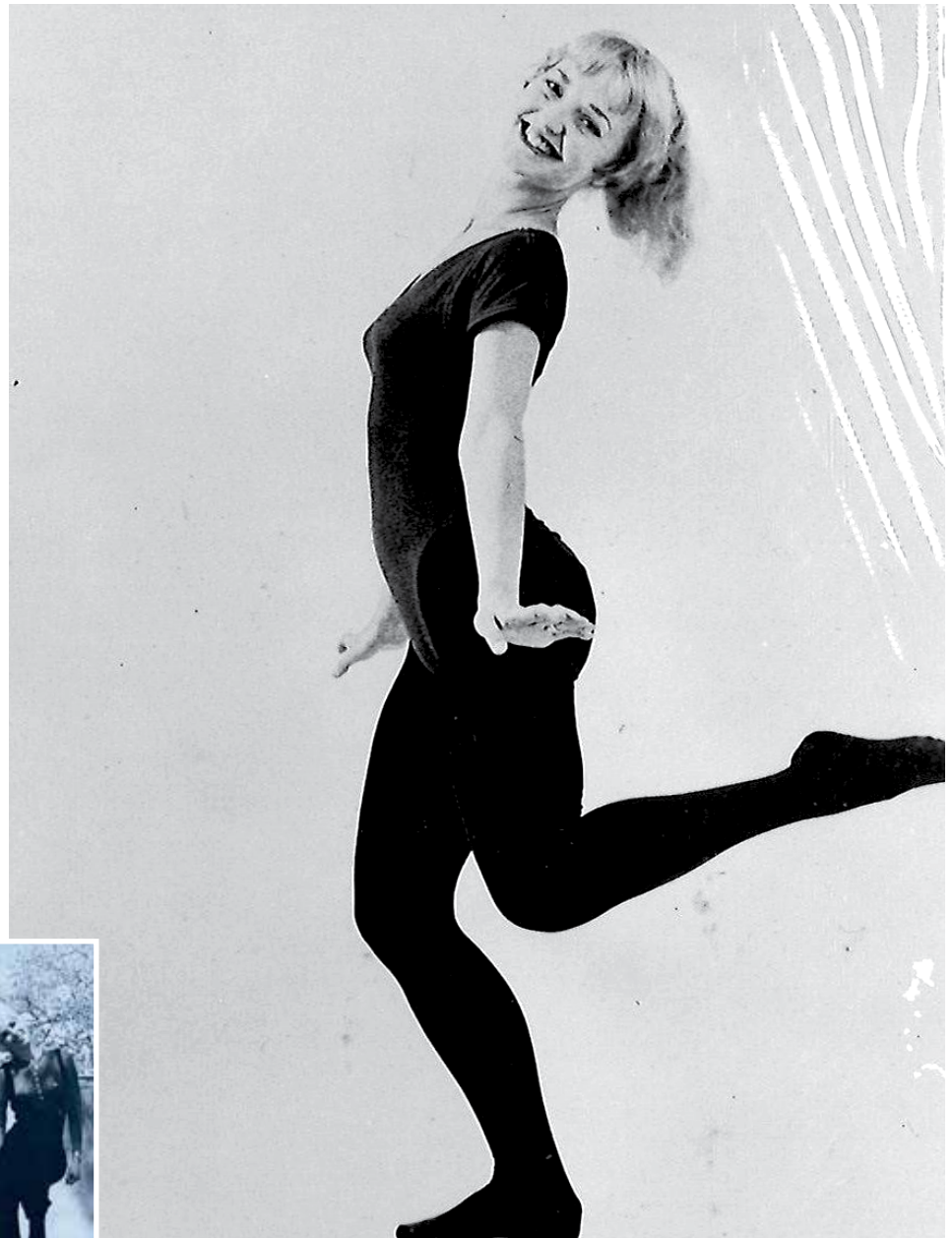
Ultimately, they landed at what was intended to be a permanent residence for their company: the iconic Orlando Utilities Commission building facing Lake Ivanhoe, built as a power plant in the 1920s. Their landlord, the City of Orlando, charged them one dollar a year to use the facility. There the company remained until 2013, when they were unexpectedly evacuated due to mold issues in the building.

## TRANSFORMATION AND GROWTH

By 1980, the organization's visibility and credibility had grown, as had its performance schedules. Thanks to the founders' vast dance connections, they were able to host big-name guest artists such as Suzanne Farrell and Peter Martins. Kip Watson's improved business savvy helped secure grant funding and status as the state's official touring company. Alas, along the way, Kip and Patti Watson's marriage ended, with Patti taking the school and Kip and Barbara Riggins taking the dance company, which had been renamed

from the Performing Arts Company of Florida to Southern Ballet Theatre. The name was changed in 2002 to Orlando Ballet to better reflect its place in the community.

For nearly a decade, the company and school continued to grow with well-received professional and student performances as well as more touring. By 1992, Kip Watson felt he had accomplished all that he wanted and announced his resignation, opening a path for new artistic leadership, including the highly respected Vasile Petrutiu followed by Fernando Bujones, considered one of the



Opposite page: Barbara Riggins and Kip Watson. Left: Barbara Riggins (from left), Kip Watson, Patti Watson (later Patti Watson Walsh). Above: Barbara Riggins.



century's greatest dancers. Bujones, who died in 2005, was succeeded by Boston Ballet's Bruce Marks, followed by Robert Hill, formerly of American Ballet Theatre and known for making ballet more accessible to all.

After Hill's decade-plus with Orlando Ballet, Jordan Morris, known for bringing his big and fanciful imagination to life on stage, stepped in and currently serves as artistic director. During the company's golden 50th season in 2023-2024, Morris featured the world premiere of his bright, new, and oh-so imaginative version of *The Nutcracker*.

## THE POWER OF CHAMPIONS

The story of Orlando Ballet would be incomplete without including the company's biggest public champions – philanthropists Harriett Lake and Krista and Jonathan Ledden, another trio with the same level of commitment and persistence as the founders.

Memorably, Lake once said, "I refuse to die until I have a place for the ballet." Years before, she had donated \$2.5 million to help build the company, and in May 2018, she committed another \$5 million for the construction of a state-of-the-art permanent home for Orlando Ballet



Top left: *Florida* magazine spotlights the Watson family, Sept. 25, 1983. Middle left: Kip Watson dances with an unidentified partner. Above: Barbara Riggins in motion. Left and facing page, top and middle right: Barbara Riggins working with students and dancers over the years.

on Lake Formosa, in the heart of the city's arts district. Sadly, the 96-year-old Lake died in July, just months before the building's October 2018 groundbreaking.

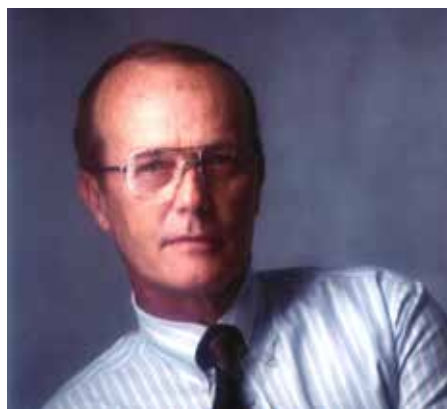
About the same time as Lake's commitment to a permanent "place for ballet," Krista and Jonathan Ledden enthusiastically joined the Orlando Ballet family through hands-on board engagement. The Leddens both began their careers in the professional dance world – Krista in dance and Jonathan in stage management. In addition to their \$2 million-plus financial commitment, the couple also drove a new strategic organizational overhaul that resulted in solvency, a sustainable climate, and an expansive vision for the future.

Everyone loves a happy ending, and as Orlando Ballet celebrates its 50th season, here its story continues into the future, for another 50 years and more. It's a story that began with hometown dancers whose big dream became a reality through their persistence and belief in themselves and their art form,

"As we celebrate our 50th season, we naturally are looking at our history. Our job is to tell the stories of others through movement and music, but our own story is something we are most proud of," says the company's executive director, Cheryl Collins. "We look forward to what really is a very bright future for Orlando Ballet." ■



Barbara Riggins



Kip Watson



Kip Watson



# EL REAL RETIRO

## THE ROYAL RETREAT OF NEW SMYRNA, FLORIDA

BY EMILY COUGHLAN

In the early 1920s, both tourism and land sales were booming in Central Florida. Wealthy northerners were cultivating properties in Florida to escape the harsh winters. One such property, built in 1923, was first known as the “Handley House” and later the Frank Bristley House or El Real Retiro. It was a grand addition to the east Volusia County city of New Smyrna (a name that would change to New Smyrna Beach in 1947).

Throughout its 100-year history, this lush estate, which is a private residence, has undergone several modifications, but it maintains the original charm and spirit of relaxation intended by its builder, Robert Handley.

### THE HANDLEY HOUSE

Born in 1893, Robert Handley was a financier and stockbroker hailing from Long Island, New York. Through hard work and determination, he amassed a

fortune in the New York City financial markets. He began his career at a young age as a messenger and office aide at the stock brokerage firm of Smith, Graham & Rockwell. After a few short years he became a partner in 1917 and later went on to start his own firm, Handley & Associates.

Handley first became interested in Florida during the post-World War I land boom. He visited New Smyrna for business in 1920, fell in love with



the area and began planning a tropical escape there. Despite not being the largest or most elaborate property in New Smyrna, the Mediterranean Revival estate he created was the most ambitious project undertaken in the city in the 1920s. It took several years to complete, as it was continuously enhanced.

Construction began with the south wing. This portion of the home was originally a one-story, three-bedroom, two-bathroom structure that housed a music room and ballroom with vaulted ceilings, a fireplace, and an east-facing patio. The north section of the home – a one- and two-story wing with only one bedroom and one bath – also included a library and the chauffeur’s quarters above the garage. While the home’s intricate design was distinctive, what makes it especially notable are the murals painted throughout by artist Robert E. Locher.

**ROBERT E. LOCHER:  
FASHIONABLE DESIGN**

Locher was born and raised in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. He trained as an architectural draftsman but yearned to be an artist. Shortly after completing his schooling, he opened a studio in New York City. Throughout his career, he made a name for himself as a fashion illustrator for magazines such as *Rogue*, *Vogue*, *House and Garden*, and *Vanity Fair*. Additionally, he excelled at costume and set design for Broadway and off-Broadway productions.

However, Locher received the greatest acclaim for his interior designs and decorative arts, particularly the lavish murals that he painted in the homes of New York society. In 1924, he was commissioned to create murals for Robert Handley’s New Smyrna home. Additional murals in the home were created by another American artist, Lauren Ford.

For his project for Handley, Locher created scenes depicting the history of Florida, from the arrival of the Spanish to the land boom days of the 1920s. Having been a fashion illustrator for several years, Locher had a particular way of drawing figures, and his depictions of people lack the traditional detail often seen in figure painting. This is especially noticeable in the murals adorning the home’s library.

In one mural, illustrating the landing of Juan Ponce de León in 1513, Locher painted him against a bright blue backdrop, standing before a Spanish galleon and surrounded by figures. This scene, as well as depictions of other ships and onlooking Indigenous Peoples envelops the fireplace. Portrayals fast forward to the modern day, displaying the first southbound steamer as bathers and other figures

Facing page: Library at El Real Retiro, courtesy Demuth Museum, Lancaster, Pennsylvania. Below: El Real Retiro, courtesy private collection.



enjoy the Florida coastline. These contrasting vignettes meld beneath a planked cypress ceiling rendered in light aquamarine to immerse the voyeur into the murals.

Another highlight of the home's decoration has become known as the Silver Hall. Inspired by Florida's flora and fauna, Locher produced an awe-inspiring passageway, papered in shimmering silver. Originally the entrance to the home was just past this corridor. Its intricate design encompasses various complimentary colors. Moss-green flooring and woodwork painted deep green accompanied the lush walls. When Locher's commission was completed, the Silver Hall and other artwork in

the house was featured in a 1925 issue of *House and Garden* magazine.

### BECOMING EL REAL RETIRO

Unfortunately, Handley suffered great losses in the stock market and was forced to sell his New Smyrna home in 1928. He eventually moved to California, where he lived until his death in 1971.

Handley's creation was purchased by an Ohio businessman, Frank D. Bristley, who named it "El Real Retiro," which is Spanish for "The Royal Retreat." Like Handley, Bristley began life as a child of humble means. Hailing from Hamilton, Ohio, he began his career as a grocery store stock boy and over time rose to the

position of store manager. Later, Bristley became sales manager and vice president of the Royal Baking Powder Company and was integral in the development of the chain-store and supermarket concepts of the grocery business. He retired in 1927 and quickly became involved in local politics upon his relocation from New York City to New Smyrna. After his death in October 1941, his widow sold their New Smyrna home and returned to New York City.

### TRANSFORMATION AND CONTINUITY

Several renovations have occurred throughout the home since Bristley's death, but one is especially significant. From its conception, the two wings of the mansion always had two personalities, so perhaps it's natural that since 1951 the house has served as two separate, private residences. The south wing of the home became 637 N. Riverside Drive, while the two-story northern wing of the home became 747 Faulkner Street.

The murals Robert Locher created still adorn the walls of the Faulkner Street residence. What was once Handley's library was converted to a living room. Locher's Silver Hall remains intact, but the door at its end is now sealed on the Faulkner side and hidden by a stucco wall on the Riverside side. Additionally, the Faulkner Street home was enhanced to include a bar and efficiency kitchen.

Library at El Real Retiro, courtesy Demuth Museum, Lancaster, Pennsylvania.



Robert E. Locher (photo by Eugene Hutchinson, ca. 1930, courtesy private collection).

Over the years, 637 N. Riverside Drive has also undergone significant renovations. The home has been fully modernized and updated, and a pool has been added. In 1987, El Real Retiro was listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

In the 1920s, Robert Handley sought to build a tropical, Mediterranean escape at New Smyrna, Florida. The homeowners, particularly the stewards of the murals, have endeavored to preserve the dwelling's history. Regardless of changes in ownership throughout the years, the façade of the property has remained nearly unchanged. Due to these efforts, if Handley were to approach the property today, he would likely recognize it as home. ■



Silver Hall at El Real Retiro, courtesy private collection.

Library at El Real Retiro, courtesy Demuth Museum, Lancaster, Pennsylvania.



# THE BUILDING PERMIT BOOKS

## UNLOCKING A VALUABLE HISTORICAL RESOURCE

BY TANA MOSIER PORTER

Little is known about the four handwritten ledgers that make up the City of Orlando Building Permit Collection held in the Brechner Research Center at the Orange County Regional History Center. A 1986 donation from the city government to the Historical Society included these ledgers containing the names of people who applied for building permits between 1906 and 1947. Permits predating these ledgers remain a mystery.

The handwriting reveals that only a few people wrote in the books. The names listed include numerous locally known African Americans, which indicates that Black residents could acquire building permits, but in those days racial segregation kept them from entering the same office or writing in the same book as white residents. Additionally, the organization, in sections by the letters of the alphabet, suggests an attempt to index the information. Within each section, the names, though they begin with the designated letter of the alphabet, are listed by date, not alphabetically.

All this suggests that a city employee sorted each day's permits alphabetically and numerically and entered them into the ledger. The employees made mistakes and omitted information. The applicant was not there to assist or correct them. Their handwriting, often hurried and frequently nearly illegible, makes reading the entries difficult. They used "ditto marks" copiously, sometimes leaving in question whether they meant "the same as above" or "eleven." But with all those faults and all that mystery, these recordkeepers left us an informative and fascinating primary resource.

A transcription effort currently underway at the History Center will resolve some of the mysteries and correct some of the errors, while

RECORD OF BUILDING PERMITS ISSUED

NUMBER	DATE OF PERMIT			NAME OF OWNER	NAME OF CONTRACTOR	KIND OF BUILDING	KIND OF ROOF	No. of Stories	No. of Rooms	FOR WHAT PURPOSE ERECTED
	MONTH	DAY	YEAR							
9	Oct	27	1906	Gore E H	McMillan H E					Drng
15	Jan	5	1907	Gore Mrs Mallon		Wood Frame		2		Drng
31	May	26	1909	Gordon John F		Wood Shingle		2	1	2 add 1 Drng
37	June	1		Grove O O	Orical Columbus	Frame		2	7	Drng kitchen
75	July	14	1910	Gore W E	Mathews J W	Gate Iron Gate Iron		1	1	Garage
127	Nov	26		Hodge L A		Frame Shingle		2	7	Drng
130	Nov	8		Horse J E	Aimnick M E	Asphalt Stone		2	6	with Bath
135	"	9		Gumrey Jas L	Orical Columbus	Frame		2	6	with 27 ft bath
141	"	21		Hesson Noah		"	"	2	12	"
174	July	13	1911	Gavin Chas H		Frame Shingle		1	6	Drng Drng
190	Nov	14	"	Goodrich O N		"	"	2	6	Drng
211	Apr	10	"	Gage Norton		"	Shd Iron	1	4	with Porcelain
254	May	15	"	Garrison David		More info. taken to make this permit complete occupied by J. S. Shop				
299	Aug	2	"	Griffin S E	Kendall E S	Frame Shingle		2		Drng
311	"	4	"	Grove J A		"	"	2		Kitchen
377	Oct	10	"	Gee August	Kirkland J F	Wood Shingle		1	5	Drng
387	"	17	"	Gumrey J L	Mathews J W					6 Drng with Bath
408	"	2	"	Gore Fred H	Jones & Larson	Frame Shingle		2	8	"
408	Nov	21	"	"	"	Wood		2	8	"
454	Jan	11	1912	Harrison E		Wood Shingle		2	8	Drng
497	"	4	"	Hills Mrs Emma B	Kocher & Larson	Asphalt Stone		2	12	"

replacing the cursive handwriting in the old ledgers with typewritten entries in a digital resource. The kind of problems encountered in the work appear in the ledger page reproduced above, from the letter G in Book One, which begins with a permit issued to E.H. Gore in 1906. It's the earliest in the book, which ends with 1920.

The random numbers in the first column could refer to the number of the building permit itself, but that can't be proven since the actual permits no longer exist; they were presumably lost in a spectacular 1973 fire at the city's Health Department. The Building Permit Books survived, perhaps because they were saved from

BY THE CITY OF ORLANDO, FLORIDA

CITY OF ORLANDO, FLORIDA		LOCATION AND DESCRIPTION OF PROPERTY				COST OF IMPROVEMENTS			REMARKS
Block File Limits	Section File Limits	LOT	Block	SEC.	Tp.	Range			
10	6	3	Dempsey Add.				1400		
10	102	2	Dempsey Add.				5200		
0			Residence NW Palmetto - Poytress Add.				300		
0	7	13	DeLamaze Add.				2500		
0			Normants Sub Sand St.				150		
			22504 Leuten Add. Hillcrest Ave.				3520		
		4	Hillcrest 2 <sup>nd</sup> Add on Livingston Ave.				1500		
		8	Mills Sub Div - Central Ave.				1500		
		15	C Goodwins Add.				1200		
		5	L Cement Park add. front of Fayette St.				500		
		7	Poytress Add (250 ft. of 22504 of lot)				500		
			250 ft. of Poytress Add 250 ft. of 22504 of lot				500		
			kindergarten				100		
		1	Hillcrest Add.				3500		
			W C Goodwins				1400		
			with app 10 25 Poles				50		
			as per app 10 25				50		
			11 of Hillcrest Ave (C)				1000		
			at Central Ave 1/2 block at the corner of Central Ave and Hillcrest Ave. 1/2 block at the corner of Central Ave and Hillcrest Ave.				1200		
		3	Normants Sub Div of part of Poles Add.				1800		
		913	" " " "				1800		
		17	Geary Add.				1500		
		7	G. Dempsey "				5000		

through city directories, though time-consuming, usually clarifies the applicant's name, and when the directories fail, the Orange County property records sometimes help, but some names remain forever uncertain. In the case of an early Seventh-day Adventist Church, only the 1919 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map in the Brechner Research Center confirmed the name. Bracketed question marks indicate unresolved issues. In the example at left, city directories confirmed the names Augusta Geis on line 377 and C. Goesswein on line 484 as property owners.

The fourth column indicates the name of the builder or contractor on the job. These often unreadable names, though interesting, are not vital to the record. On line 32 of the page at left, Columbus Sweat was indeed the contractor's name.

The next five columns – Kind of Building, Kind of Roof, Number of Stories, Number of Rooms, and For What Purpose Erected – are occasionally filled out properly, but they are often skipped entirely and sometimes are filled with material that would seem to belong on the building permit itself. This material, including unfamiliar abbreviations, usually appears written across all of the spaces, as shown by lines 254 and 324 of the ledger page.

The column noting a building's purpose contains the most interesting information. It normally designates a residence or dwelling, but other interesting structures often appear in this column, including churches, schools, and businesses. Social changes become obvious here. Bungalows appeared about 1911, along with houses built to be rentals. Most listings employed frame construction, with occasional brick or concrete, but roof materials varied. Some houses had only one room, though more commonly

the fire or because they were stored elsewhere – allegedly in a shed at Tinker Field, Orlando's now-gone baseball stadium. Book One has suffered moisture damage consistent with a fire or inappropriate storage. Reading across, the next group of three columns provides the date of the permit. Most permit research

focuses on determining the age of the structure, making this perhaps the most important information. The third column, also important, contains the name of the property owner who applied for the permit. In this troublesome column, the names are often unclear due to misspelling or difficult handwriting. A search



The City of Orlando Building Permits Collection contains a treasure trove of historical details. For example, on July 16, 1913, First Baptist Church trustees applied for a permit to build a frame addition, at a cost of \$500, to house the church organ.



The Elks Club took out a permit on Oct. 31, 1913, to “make improvements” costing \$20 to its clubhouse at East Central Avenue and Court Street. Six years later, in 1919, the Elks planned to spend \$300 to “alter a room” in that same clubhouse.



The Board of Public Instruction pulled a permit on June 9, 1917, for a two-story, brick school building to cost \$31,417. Contractor F.A. Peppercorn was hired to construct the building in Ramsey’s Subdivision on Central Avenue. Ironically, the building burned in 1973, destroying the existing copies of the building permits that had been stored there.

two or three. In the mid-teens, people began adding bathrooms to existing houses and then including them in new construction. Sleeping porches became popular additions. About 1919 garages replaced barns as people acquired automobiles.

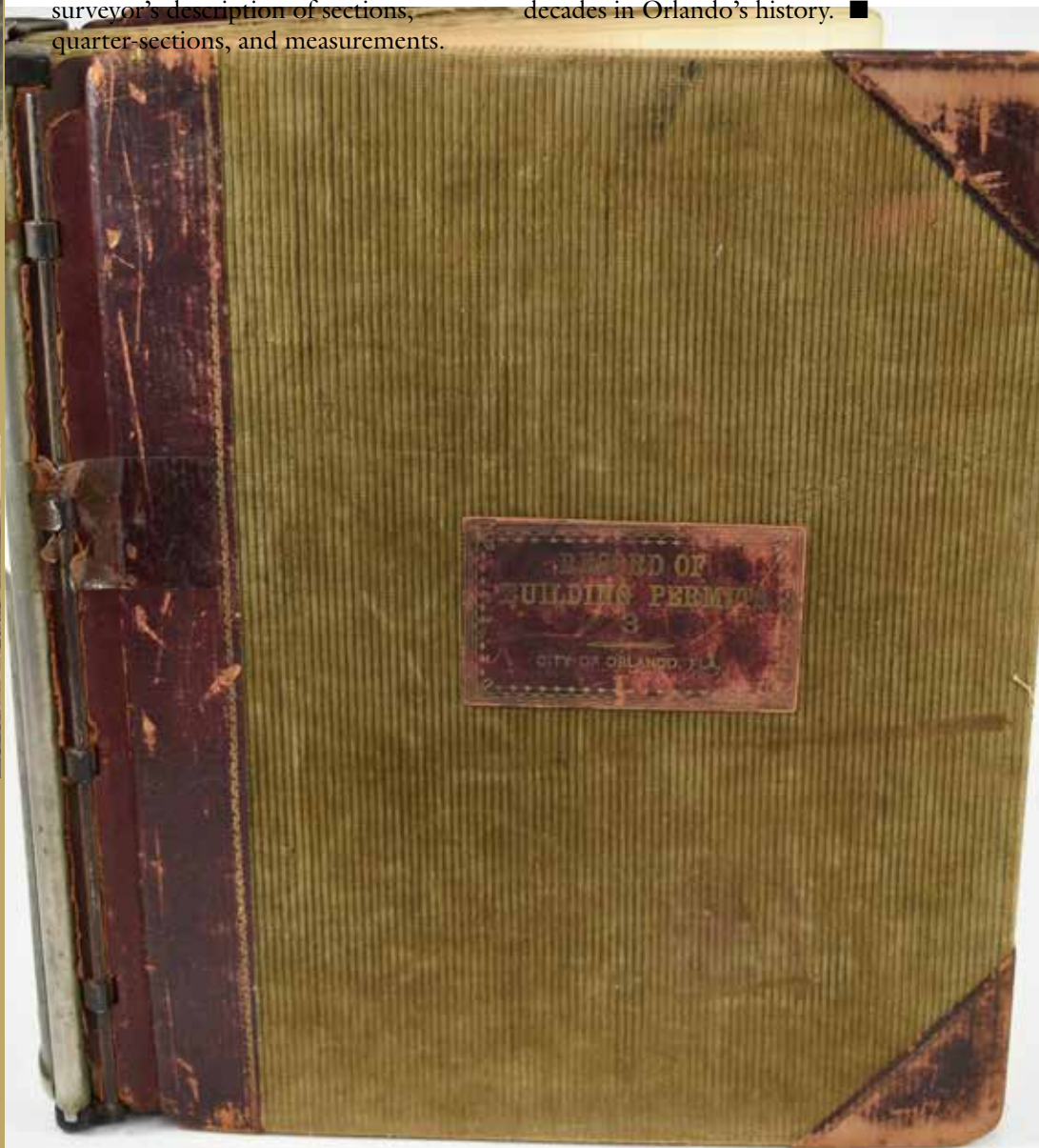
In the last columns, property descriptions showing the expansion of the city into new territory often present a problem. Bracketed question marks appear here frequently. But the county property records usually verify the name of the development and also whether it is an addition or a subdivision. Many of the earliest cited Reid’s Addition, a downtown platting, and later other builders’ subdivisions of part of Reid’s. And later still, numerous permits named locations in Concord Park, a large development along Colonial Drive. Some applications, especially the earliest, include the surveyor’s description of sections, quarter-sections, and measurements.

The descriptions are often difficult to follow and transcribe properly, while separate columns for Section, Township, and Range mostly remain unused.

The final column records the cost, almost universally incorrect according to contemporary sources. Newspaper announcements of coming construction nearly always show much higher costs for the work than what appears in the permit application.

This is Book One, for the years 1906 to 1920. Book Two covers 1921 to 1925 and details construction during the Florida Land Boom. Book Three, 1926 to 1937, documents the Great Depression, and Book Four, 1938 to 1947, includes postwar growth.

Taken together, they provide a valuable resource for understanding the urbanization process during four early decades in Orlando’s history. ■





Mayor Glenda Hood



Commissioner Mary I. Johnson

# Women Who Made Our City Beautiful: The Legacies of Glenda Hood and Mary I. Johnson

By Adaeze Nwigwe

**M**agical, picturesque, and for a period phenomenal: all were descriptions that could be applied to the city of Orlando in 1908. Early migrants to the area such as Jessie Johnson Branch from South Dakota were enraptured by the verdant sights and the startling sounds of the bustling city – so much so that in 1908 she and her husband joined a competition to ascribe a more fitting name to the city. Her submission of “The City Beautiful” resonated with residents then just as it continues to do today. Branch’s story also illustrates another important tradition within Orlando, that of women being pivotal to honoring the city’s beauty.

Decades later, this legacy resonated in Orlando with later generations of women leaders. Among them were the familiar faces of former Orlando Mayor Glenda Hood and City Commissioner Mary I. Johnson (who was also an Orange County commissioner). Together these women upheld the

motto through their many initiatives to improve our city and make it truly beautiful.

On June 30, 1988, then commissioners Hood and Johnson stood side by side with Mayor Bill Frederick to rededicate Lake Eola Park to the people of Orlando, solidifying their commitment of service to the city. Lake Eola Park was established as the city’s first public park in 1883 when Jacob Summerlin donated a portion of his land to the city. Since then, it has continued to be a popular area of recreation.

In the 1980s, however, the area surrounding Lake Eola Park became inundated with crime and a neglected homeless population. These conditions inspired local leaders like Hood and Johnson to participate in the area’s restoration in 1988. This effort for the park totaled \$3.3 million and included increased security measures, an information booth to learn more about the city, and other eye-catching amenities.

The park had shared significance to both women, as it embodied “The City Beautiful” mission and their personal ties to this space. In a 1995 oral history interview, Hood described the park as her true childhood playground, a place where she and her family would go to watch the the landmark fountain change colors. Additionally, Johnson was a self-proclaimed “big park person” who enjoyed creating more open, green spaces for Orlando residents. The work to restore Lake Eola Park served as just one early example of both women’s life-long commitment to the Orlando community.

## **Hood: Deep roots in Orlando**

A fourth-generation Central Florida native, Hood has always held Orlando close to her heart. She grew up in the area, attending Oak Ridge High School and then Rollins College, where she obtained a bachelor’s degree in Spanish



Above: Mayor Glenda Hood at the dedication of Z.L. Riley Park on Parramore Avenue in July 1997. Right: Commissioner Mary Johnson receives an ovation on Feb. 26, 1993, at the Orlando Naval Training Center's Recruit Graduation Exercises. Below right: Aerial view of downtown Orlando and Lake Eola, ca. 1990s.

literature. After settling into married life and motherhood, Hood became active in volunteering and from the start set her sights on improving the city of Orlando.

During one of Hood's earliest positions with the Downtown Development Board, she created a walking tour and helped organize concerts. Hood continued to serve her community through her role as a city commissioner, as the first woman mayor of Orlando (1992-2003), and as Florida's secretary of state (2003-2005). In a 1992 interview, Hood described her interest in politics as "a way to bring together my commitment to the community and my business skills and . . . be a part of making decisions for the future of this community."

Armed with this philosophy, Hood employed numerous measures to beautify the city. Early in her tenure as Orlando's mayor, she negotiated a partnership between a public and private entity to preserve a 26-acre parcel of land near the downtown area. She was able to persuade the private owners to retain ownership but allow the City of Orlando to maintain the property as a city green space. Moreover, she implemented the Mayor's Neighborhood Matching Grants program in 1994, which provided Orlando's neighborhood

associations with grants for projects to improve the quality of life in certain communities. These projects included both external, aesthetic improvements such as entranceway beautification and internal improvements such as providing emergency response training to residents.

Other notable initiatives by Hood include her 1999 three-year plan in which \$30 million was allotted "to

increase Orlando's green space from 735 to 1,000 acres." She also planned for the number of parks to increase from 63 to 72. Hood used her position as a public servant to help the residents within Orlando especially in the downtown area, which she called "the signature of the city."

### **Johnson: Newcomer who left a legacy**

The downtown area proved significant not only for Hood but also for Johnson, who felt that "a healthy downtown is good for any city and area." Like Jessie Johnson Branch decades earlier, Johnson was a migrant to Orlando who ultimately left a big impact. Originally from New York, she settled in Central Florida after her marriage to Navy Chief Petty Officer





Robert “Bob” Johnson in 1954. She became involved in volunteering for organizations such as Navy Wives Club and the Red Cross, as a dental hygienist. This interest in public service continued to blossom in 1980 when she became the first person of Hispanic descent to be elected to Orlando City Council. She served three terms as a commissioner for District 2 from 1980-1992 and another three terms for District 3.

During this time, “The City Beautiful” was a motto Johnson took seriously, which is plainly seen through her multiple park initiatives. She participated in advocating for the creation of a park in predominantly Latin American communities such as Azalea Park, where she collaborated in the development of Azalea Park Field of Dreams. Like her colleague Hood,

Johnson’s efforts for improvement were not limited to outside appearances. She supported those within her community as well, most significantly through her establishment of the Victim Service Center of Central Florida near downtown Orlando.

The Victim Service Center was created when Johnson realized the lack of services for survivors of crime. She rallied for funding and support through Orange County Government, and following a persistent effort, she was able to establish the center in 1999. The Victim Service Center functions to support community members at their most vulnerable through resources including legal advocacy, therapy, and a 24/7 crisis hotline.

A butterfly symbol can be seen on the organization’s website. Johnson

frequently wore a butterfly pin on the back of her jacket as a personal representation of hope and a new beginning. She wanted all those who visited the center to see it as a new start toward a safer, beautiful life. This desire to help those within the community can also be seen through her mentorship efforts. At Harry P. Leu Gardens, while introducing residents to the beauty of the space, she would annually host recruitment teas. An April 1999 *Orlando Sentinel* article described these meetings as “a forum for women to discuss and assess their status as leaders in government.”

In this way, Johnson demonstrated her eagerness to guide women dedicated to helping those in their communities. Current District 3 Commissioner Mayra Uribe described Johnson as “an amazing woman who inspired so many young girls, including me, to serve their communities.” Uribe recalled canvassing for Johnson’s campaign with her parents as a young child, and remembers Johnson telling her, “Always be respectful and earn respect.”

The spirit of collaboration, mentorship, and community continues to live on through the legacies of both Hood and Johnson’s service to the City of Orlando. Despite Johnson’s passing in 2020 and Hood’s retirement from public service, their steadfastness to Orlando’s creed can still be seen today. Lake Eola Park and other green spaces continue to be an expression of Orlando’s commitment to innovation and a community of beauty for all. The work of both women illustrates the resilience of women dedicated to making and keeping the city beautiful. ■

Below: Commissioner Mary Johnson speaks on May 21, 1994, at a Community Appreciation Day in Blanchard Park. Below right: Rafael Francisco Saldaña (from left), Orlando Mayor Glenda Hood, Orange County Mayor Linda Chapin, and Commissioner Mary Johnson, ca. 1990s.



Yours very Truly  
Fred A. Stone.



# THE VERSATILE FRED STONE

*Broadway's Grand Old Man and Rollins College*

By Steve Rajtar

For decades, theater students at Winter Park's Rollins College went to classes, rehearsed, and performed in a small red-brick building north of the Annie Russell Theatre that was named for Fred Stone. That's far from a household name now, but for more than a half-century, Stone was a major, consistent star in American theater and early Hollywood movies. In a career that spanned more than 60 years, he performed as an acrobat, dancer, singer, actor, and comedian. In 1917, *Vanity Fair's* theater critic, P.G. Wodehouse, declared that Fred Stone was unique among popular actors. "In a profession where the man who can dance can't sing and the man who can sing can't act," Stone stood alone "as one who can do everything," Wodehouse wrote.

## An acrobatic start

Fred Andrew Stone was born on August 29, 1873, in Valmont, Colorado, where his parents, Lewis and Clarissa Stone, had landed after a covered-wagon trek across the plains from Iowa. The family moved around to several towns in Colorado and Kansas, where in Dodge City young Fred worked in his father's barber shop, shining shoes. A move to Wellington, Kansas, introduced a 10-year-old Fred to the theatrical world when he saw a tightrope walker perform and was inspired to become an entertainer.

Fred and his younger brother, Eddie, practiced their acrobatic and tightrope skills and before the end of the 1880s joined DeArley and O' Brien's Circus as "The Stone Brothers." They toured with circus and variety shows and also performed in medicine shows, vaudeville, minstrel shows, honky tonks, and musical comedies. During a stint as a circus clown in 1895, Fred Stone joined forces with David C. Montgomery, and

the duo became one of the era's most famous comedy teams, performing together for the next 22 years, until Montgomery's death. As a tribute to Montgomery, Stone vowed he would never have another performing partner.

## Marriage and Oz

On August 24, 1904, Stone married Allene Crater, a talented performer who also sang light opera. Three years later, her sister, Edith, would marry Rollins alumnus and famous novelist Rex Beach, which would eventually introduce Stone to the Winter Park college.

Along with Montgomery and Stone, Crater had been part of the original Broadway cast of *The Wizard of Oz*, based on L. Frank Baum's novel, which began its run in 1902. Stone was cast as the Scarecrow, a part that required not only acting and singing but also dancing and acrobatics. Montgomery played the Tin Woodsman, and Crater portrayed the Woodsman's girlfriend, Cynthia Cynch, the "Lady Lunatic."

In addition to performing, Stone worked to better actors' lives. In 1896, he was one of "The White Rats of America," a group formed to win better working conditions from theater managers and the predecessor of the Actors Equity

Association. He also served in 1922 as president of National Vaudeville Artists Inc., which raised money to aid performers who needed financial help. Two years later, he participated in the Actors Equity Association strike.

Fred and Allene Stone had three daughters – Dorothy, Paula, and Carol – whom they encouraged to love the theater. All three women became actors. The Stone sisters also shared their parents' hobbies, which included horseback riding, fishing, hunting, and golf. Each of them performed with their father on stage from time



Opposite: Fred Stone in 1911. Above: Stone (left) and Dave Montgomery as the Scarecrow and the Tin Man in the first stage production of *The Wizard of Oz*, 1902.

to time, and the devoted family man loved sharing his life and the stage with his wife and children.

Stone's interests extended to aviation, and by 1928 he was taking flying lessons and had earned a student license. That August, during a short solo flight from Groton, Connecticut, to earn credits for his full pilot's license, the motor of Stone's biplane stalled, sending the plane into a nosedive, and Stone's legs were severely injured in the resulting crash. The accident took place during the Broadway run of the musical *Three Cheers*, which had been written for him and his daughter Dorothy. To take his place in the cast, his second-best friend (after Montgomery), humorist Will Rogers, stepped in while Stone worked hard to recover the use of his crushed legs. He returned to the play in a relatively short time, but his dancing career was over.

Rather than leave entertainment, Stone turned to dramatic productions in 1934 with the play *The Jayhawker*, which also featured his daughter Carol. The following year, he portrayed Katharine Hepburn's father in the movie *Alice Adams*, based on a novel by Booth Tarkington. His cinematic career had begun in 1915 with the silent film *Destiny: Or, The Soul of a Woman* and continued through *The Westerner* in 1940, starring



In 1939, Stone directed and starred in the Rollins College production of *Lightnin'* to support the purchase of the bungalow that became the Fred Stone Laboratory Theatre.

Gary Cooper. In 1960, Stone was posthumously awarded a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame.

During his lifetime, Stone was close friends with many well-known individuals, including champion boxer "Gentleman" Jim Corbett and the famed sharpshooter Annie Oakley. His brother-in-law, the novelist Rex Beach, held Stone in high esteem, describing him as "probably the best-loved figure on the American stage. . . . Anyone in the profession will tell you that he has brought more mirth into the hearts of the theatre-going public than any other man before the footlights."

But, as Beach saw it, "the biggest thing about Fred is not his genius as an entertainer and his hold upon the affections of the American public, nor is it the fact that he made good with but few advantages; it is the fact that in spite of his enormous success he has remained a simple, honest, and charitable man. He is the Peter Pan of our day."

#### Roles at Rollins

During 1938, Stone appeared in a Broadway revival of Frank Bacon's play *Lightnin'* – a popular comedy that had first been a hit in 1918. The following January, Stone directed the same show and starred in the role of *Lightnin'* Bill Jones at the Annie Russell Theatre on the Rollins campus. The production



From left: Professor Donald S. Allen and Mrs. Allen with Fred Stone, in front of a portrait of Stone, at a tea celebrating the reopening of the Fred Stone Laboratory Theatre.



Fred Stone (right) at Rollins College in 1927 with novelist Rex Beach, Stone's brother-in-law. Beach was awarded an honorary doctorate and the bachelor's he had not completed with the class of 1897.

raised funds the college used to purchase a 1921 wooden bungalow that had served as the Chi Omega sorority house, located across the street from the theater.

Stone was awarded an honorary degree from Rollins College in 1939 and participated as a distinguished presenter in the first of his three appearances at the college's Animated Magazine, an annual event featuring speeches and presentations by nationally known figures that attracted audiences from far beyond campus.

Also in 1939, Rollins opened its New Laboratory Theatre in the wooden building bought with the proceeds from the college's production of *Lightnin'*. A year later, the building was renamed the Laboratory Theatre, and on October 25, 1940, it was dedicated as the Fred Stone Laboratory Theatre in the venerable actor's honor. The college added a large scene shop and auditorium around the small house, all of which were renovated in 1963. Stone did not live to see the renovations; he died on March 6, 1959, two years after his wife of more than 50 years, Allene, who died in 1957.

Long after his death, Fred Stone's name lived on at Rollins. In 1973, the college tore down the old wooden theater building and transferred the name Fred Stone Theatre to a 1926

Greek Revival-style building that was the former sanctuary of the Winter Park Baptist Church. It had been purchased by the college in 1961, when it was relocated to the corner of Comstock and Interlachen avenues and named Bingham Hall. In 1965, it was moved to the present site of the Cornell Social Science Center, and in 1973 was converted to theater space.

To make room for the Cornell building, the former church was moved one last time, in 1987, across Chase Avenue. It seated 90 in its black-box space, just right for experimental productions and those choreographed and directed by students, serving as a working tribute to the multi-talented Stone, sometimes referred to as “The Grand Old Man of Broadway.”

In the spring of 2018, structural damage was discovered in the building that rendered it unsafe, and it was demolished in August.

It was “very hard to say ‘goodbye’ to our guy this morning,” an August 10, 2018, post read on the Facebook page for the Fred Stone Theatre, long



dubbed “the Fred” by students and faculty. “As we mourn the home of so many memories, we remind ourselves that the magic of the Fred resides not in these bricks, but in the people inside.” ■

Top left: The former Chi Omega sorority house provided the first location of the Fred Stone Laboratory Theatre. Top right: This version of Fred Stone Theatre, purchased by Rollins in 1961, was originally the Winter Park Baptist Church, built in 1926. Bottom left: The interior was painted with murals depicting famous American actors in their roles. Bottom right: On April 3, 1973, the seating and work areas of the Fred Stone Theatre were demolished.

All images courtesy of the Department of College Archives and Special Collections, Olin Library, Rollins College, Winter Park, FL.

## Fred & Me By Scottie Campbell

On May 2, 2018, I attended an informal ceremony to say goodbye to the Fred Stone Theatre, which would be demolished later in the year. I can’t recall how I heard about it, probably the subconscious compass of our current lives – social media – but I took time off work to be there. It’s probably a familiar feeling to all of us when we step on the campus of our alma mater: we are home, surrounded by some familiar faces but largely faces of young strangers who haven’t quite understood the harbor the campus will become.

What did showing up that day mean to me? There was a sense of duty to my classmates who couldn’t be there. It was clear to me the upkeep of the onetime church had been ignored, so the activist side of me was there to say, to no admin who cared: I see you. I was there for the anthropomorphic Fred. And I was there for me. To say goodbye to memories. Memories I wanted that building to hold because my own faculties will eventually become an unreliable archive.

Within the walls of that church-cum-black-box-theater, I took classes that deconstructed the cocky actor I was and rebuilt him as a professional artist. For one entire semester, my classmate Aaron Bean and I worked on a scene from *Death of a Salesman*. Our teacher, Scott LaFeber, took us through various exercises to delve into Arthur Miller’s work including “A Private Moment” – an Actor’s Studio-inspired exercise in which I reconstructed my dorm room in the Fred, and Aaron paid me a “surprise” visit. It is hard to explain, but to this day, part of me thinks Aaron and I are brothers from that

exploration. I also had the opportunity in those walls to workshop a scene from *Hamlet* with Olympia Dukakis (I anticipated she’d be intimidating, and I was not disappointed), which I later performed in the Fred in front of Broadway legend Anne Pitoniak. Like so many students, I spent countless hours in the Fred doing scene work, directing plays, performing, and even in engaging in the occasional moments of unauthorized shenanigans that may or may not have involved lemon drop shots.

On February 23, 2023, I returned to campus for a more formal ceremony to unveil the \$8 million Tiedtke Theatre & Dance Centre. Located conveniently behind the Annie Russell Theatre, the new facility brings together a dance studio, costume studio, and a black box theater which previously were spread around the campus, and it includes classroom space that didn’t exist. State of the art and dynamic, the new theater space puts our old Fred to shame, and is named the Sally K. Albrecht Studio Theatre, after the alumna who paid for it. Fred is honored with The Fred Stone Acting & Directing Laboratory and, on my visit that February day, it had already been embraced as trusted space for daring young people to hone their craft, and an immediate repository of memories.

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### FROM THE COLLECTION

NASA recently celebrated the 55th anniversary of Apollo 7, which launched on Oct. 11, 1968. It was the first manned flight in the Apollo program and the first crewed space flight in 22 months, after the Apollo 1 launch rehearsal fire that killed three astronauts in January 1967. The 10-day voyage of Apollo 7, which featured 163 orbits, was led by Commander Walter Schirra and included Command Module Pilot Donn Eisele and Lunar Module Pilot R. Walter Cunningham.

Shortly after returning to Earth, the Apollo 7 astronauts appeared on a special episode of *The Bob Hope Show*, filmed in an auditorium at the Manned Spacecraft Center in Houston. The trio presented Hope, an avid admirer and supporter of the space program, with a small flag of the United States that accompanied them into space. The Bob & Dolores Hope Foundation recently donated this commemorative display, along with several other treasures from Hope's space-program collection, to the Orange County Regional History Center.

## HONORING DISTINGUISHED SERVICE: OUR EMERITUS VOLUNTEERS

This spring, during National Volunteer Week in April, we salute the great importance of volunteer service at the Orange County Regional History Center and across our state and country. Our volunteers offer invaluable support for the museum through their work in our summer camps, public programming, school tours, and much more, including the Joseph L. Brechner Research Center. This year, we especially salute our emeritus volunteers, who have given countless hours to helping us tell Central Florida's continually unfolding story.

### ABOUT THE AWARD

The purpose of our Volunteer Emeritus status is to recognize volunteers who have long, faithful, and distinguished service to the History Center. Volunteers who have served for at least five years and 500 or more hours are eligible for Emeritus status.

### OUR 2024 HONOREE, MARK LINE

We are honored to present this year's Volunteer Emeritus Award to Mark George Line for 20 years and more than 1200 hours of distinguished volunteer service. As a docent, Mark shares Central Florida's stories and engages groups with the historical essence of Orlando. He was instrumental in creating the Volunteer Affinity Committee and served as its first chair.

Mark has long promoted History Center membership, sharing the good our museum does for the community. His involvement with the Historical

Society of Central Florida, which supports the museum, started in 2006, when he served as a committee member. He served as president of the society's board in 2014-2015. Mark is truly a great ambassador for the History Center, welcoming children, adults, groups, members, patrons, and future volunteers!

To learn more about volunteer opportunities at the History Center, please contact our volunteer coordinator, Diane Masciale, at 407-836-8523 or e-mail her at [Diane.Masciale@ocfl.net](mailto:Diane.Masciale@ocfl.net).

### VOLUNTEER EMERITUS AWARD RECIPIENTS

- Pete Abdalla
- Betty Barnes
- Judith Beale
- Chris Becht
- Dorothy Berner
- Gloria Boward
- Beth Brewer
- Carolyn Dixon
- Tracy Donaldson
- Larry Doyle
- Mildred Dunlap
- Frank English
- Joyce English
- Linda Hardesty
- Harold Hulse
- D. James
- Mark Line
- Ted Maslanik
- Roye Moye
- Phyllis Myers
- Carol Parker
- Lynn Poche
- Peggy Snedeker
- Jim Stowers
- Lou Williams



# HISTORIC HAPPENINGS

## SAM RIVERS 100



In October we honored the life and legacy of the late Sam Rivers, celebrating the musician's 100th birthday with a day of activities. This included an evening concert by the Sam Rivers Rejuvenation Orchestra, Rivers's 16-piece orchestra that has continued to perform for eager audiences.

## FIGUREHEAD NIGHT OUT WEEKEND



This concert celebrated the Orlando music scene of the 1980s and '90s with live performances from Orlando favorites Steven Foxbury, The Riddlers, Greg Reinel, and The Tremolords. Other events included a downtown walking tour and a morning-after brunch with singer/songwriter Terri Binion.

## HISTORY ALIVE FEATURING LURE DESIGN



Guests were able to browse and buy concert posters and prints from Lure's extensive archive and participate in a live screen-printing demonstration. A special guided tour of our *Figurehead* exhibition complemented our traditional History Alive interactive experiences and hands-on activities.

## SEMINOLE PORTRAITS



In November, folklorist Annette B. Fromm presented the story of how images and perceptions of Native People, especially the Florida Seminole, have been manipulated, as well as how the Seminole have been represented by artists from their own community in contemporary times.

## TRICK OR TREAT SAFE ZONE



Ghosts and ghouls came to life for our annual Trick or Treat Safe Zone. Kids of all ages enjoyed trick or treating throughout the History Center and the Orlando Public Library along with creepy crafts, candy, games, and more!

## LATIN AMERICAN ARTS & CULTURE CELEBRATION



In September, guests had an opportunity to meet Central Florida artists representing several Latin American countries and enjoyed live heritage music and dance performances, plus family-friendly crafts and activities.



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