REFLECTIONS FROM CENTRAL FLORIDA

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CENTRAL FLORIDA

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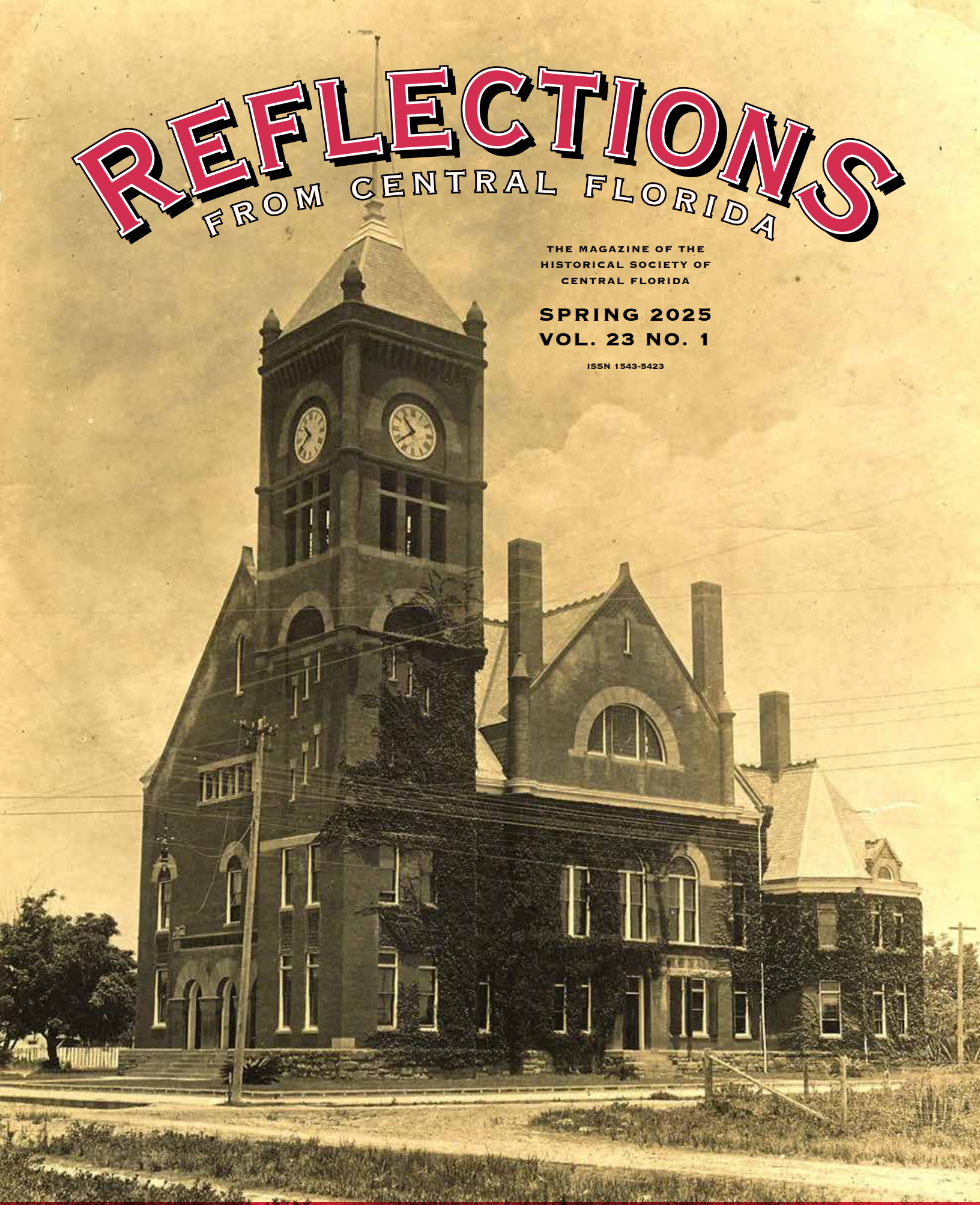

COMMEMORATING ORLANDO'S 150TH YEAR

HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF CENTRAL FLORIDA

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.

The Orange County Regional History Center is financed in part by Orange County through its Community and Family Services Department under Mayor Jerry L. Demings and the Board of County Commissioners. The contents, views, and opinions of contributors do not necessarily reflect those of the publishers and editors, county or state officials, or any other agency.

The History Center is accessible with elevators on every floor.

FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Stories That Shape Us

I am thrilled to introduce myself as the new executive director of the Orange County Regional History Center and the Historical Society of Central Florida. I am honored to join this incredible institution, which serves as a cornerstone for preserving and celebrating the rich history of Central Florida.

With a deep passion for storytelling, community engagement, and fostering connections, I look forward to building on the History Center's legacy. Over the years, the History Center has become a vital resource for exploring our shared stories and experiences, and I am committed to ensuring that it remains a vibrant and inclusive space for amplifying the diverse voices that make our region unique.

Each of us has our own personal story, and storytelling is a powerful way to connect people. My father, a Filipino citizen, was recruited by the U.S. Navy in the 1970s during a time of social unrest and economic challenges. By enlisting, my father and mother were able to build a new life for our family in the United States. As a Florida native, I had a deep appreciation for my heritage and also served as a bridge for my parents as they navigated living in a new country. Their story, like many others, is one of hope, resilience, and opportunity – a story that bridges cultures, generations, and continents.

It's stories like theirs – and like yours – that remind us of the power of history to connect us. It reminds us that history isn't just something we study – it's something we live. Each of us carries a story, beautifully our own, yet connected to others in ways that bind us together. The Orange County Regional History Center has long been a space for those connections – a place for sharing and exploring these stories to foster greater social engagement, understanding, and meaningful conversation.

As we embark on this next chapter together, my vision for the History Center is continuing to evolve, guided by the remarkable foundation already in place and informed by the community we serve. It is my vision to encourage collaboration, accessibility, inclusive dialogue, community engagement, and sustainability. The Orange County Regional History Center is a bridge: one that connects past, present, and future, and invites everyone to reflect on their own stories while learning from the stories of others.

I am honored to build on the incredible work already being done and look forward to partnering with all of you to ensure the History Center remains a vibrant, inclusive, and inspiring place for our community. Together, we will celebrate the stories that define us and create a legacy for generations to come. ■

– Azela Santana, Executive Director, Orange County Regional History Center

ABOUT THE COVER

In this issue, we are celebrating Orlando's 150th anniversary with stories that highlight the city's unique history. One of those stories is shown on the cover – the 1892 red brick courthouse. Although the courthouse is a structure that falls under the jurisdiction of Orange County, it stood as an icon in the center of downtown Orlando from 1892 until it was demolished in 1957. Located where Heritage Square Park is today, the brick courthouse served beyond its official use – after the 1927 courthouse was built just behind it, the 1892 structure was a meeting place for Orlandoans. In 1942, a small history exhibit was created by the Antiquarian Society, which served as a precursor to the Orange County Historical Society.

CONTRIBUTORS

Sarah M. Boye

Sarah Boye is a graduate researcher specializing in public history at the University of Central Florida and holds a bachelor's degree in history. Sarah serves as the historical researcher for Greenwood Cemetery, where she recently developed the city's official digital walking tour of the cemetery. She is also working on a project to collect oral histories from the Parramore community.

Joy Wallace Dickinson

Joy Wallace Dickinson grew up in Orlando, where she remembers seeing at least one alligator in the lake across from her childhood home in Thornton Park. From 2000 to 2023, she wrote the "Florida Flashback" feature in the *Orlando Sentinel*. She's the author of three nonfiction books and a mystery novel set in the 1940s titled *Secrets of the Flamingo Café*.

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). He is currently the co-host of the *Florida Spectacular* podcast.

William S. Morgan V

William S. "Billy" Morgan V currently serves as the chief financial officer of the Orange County Regional History Center and as chairman of the annual Pine Castle Pioneer Days festival. He also serves on the board of directors for the Central Florida Genealogical Society and has traced his roots in Central Florida over ten generations.

Brendan Bunting O'Connor

Brendan O'Connor is a transplanted Canadian who came to Orlando via EPCOT. O'Connor is editor-in-chief of Bungalower Media, and you can hear him on Real Radio's "Bungalower and the Bus." He is author of "100 Things to do in Orlando Before You Die," host of "Restaurants on the Radar" and "On The Job" on Very Local, and a columnist for *Orlando Magazine*.

Rachel Williams

Rachel Williams holds a bachelor's degree and a master's degree in history and public history from the University of Central Florida. She is currently the historian at the History Center, where she works on various projects such as conducting oral histories and assisting the public with research projects.

IN THIS ISSUE

Reflections From Central Florida
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To receive the latest *Reflections* by mail, email HistoryCenter@ocfl.net to become a member. To contribute an article, email HistoryCenter@ocfl.net.

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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.

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

HISTORIC HAPPENINGS

AZELA MEET 'N' GREET

A meet and greet to welcome the Orange County Regional History Center's new executive director, Azela Santana, was held in December in our Linda Chapin Gallery. Attendees included elected officials, leaders from the arts and cultural community, staff, and other well-wishers.

DAVID BROMSTAD INTERVIEW

NBC affiliate WESH-Channel 2 chose the *Cover Story* exhibition as the setting for their interview with HGTV star David Bromstad. Bromstad was the grand marshal for the 2024 Come Out With Pride parade.

TRICK OR TREAT SAFE ZONE

On Saturday, Oct. 26, 2024, kids and families enjoyed trick or treating throughout the History Center and the Orlando Public Library along with a scavenger hunt, creepy crafts, candy, games, and more at our annual Trick or Treat Safe Zone.

HISTORIC HOLIDAY EXPERIENCE

In December, the History Center debuted an interactive and intimate holiday experience. Guests enjoyed decorating ornaments, making festive-themed crafts, writing letters to Santa, caroling, storytelling, and a private visit with Santa and Mrs. Claus, all while raising funds for the Historical Society.

WATERMARK ANNIVERSARY

Near the end of August, multifaceted LGBTQ+ media company Watermark held their 30th anniversary celebration for invited guests in our exhibition *Cover Story: Celebrating Watermark's 30 Years*. A special anniversary issue of the publication was available documenting the anniversary.

SENSORY SUNDAYS

On Sensory Sundays we provide a welcoming and comfortable experience for guests with autism spectrum disorder and sensory processing sensitivity. Additionally, we have created sensory-friendly activities throughout the museum to engage a wide variety of guests with hands-on history learning.

The City Beautiful Turns 150

This year marks 150 years since the settlement on the Florida frontier that became Orlando was incorporated as a town. Then Orlando claimed 85 residents in just 4 square miles. Today it boasts worldwide fame and is synonymous with vacation fun, but it got its start in a serious way in 1838 as Fort Gatlin during the Seminole Wars. Settlers gathered around the fort and put down roots that took hold, calling the place Jernigan. In 1856, it became the county seat and soon changed its name to Orlando. Two decades later, it was ready to be an official town.

In the 150 years since 1875 and those 85 residents, Orlando has grown into a vibrant and diverse city of more than 300,000 – the heart of a much larger metropolitan area. In honor of its 150 official years, in April the History Center will unveil a special exhibition, *Orlando Collected*, that will showcase 150 fascinating and rarely seen items from the city's history, selected from the collections of the Historical Society of Central Florida. Through the contributions of local historians, community organizations, and individuals, the museum's staff has thoughtfully collected photographs, documents, artifacts, and memories that weave the intricate tapestry of our city's past, reflecting a rich variety of perspectives on its history.

Also during 2025, *Reflections from Central Florida* will delve into stories exclusively about the city of Orlando, exploring some of the many topics that over the decades have made our community the interesting, complex, and diverse place it is today. Turn the page to start with a timeline noting just a few of the notable dates and milestones in Orlando's past. Here's to the City Beautiful at 150!

Left: 1960s City of Orlando seal painted by Howard Greydon Gano; this object will be displayed during *Orlando Collected*. Above: Orlando brochure from 1914.

Orlando Timeline

1838 Fort Gatlin founded Nov. 9 during the Seminole Wars.

1843 Jernigan family settles near the fort in July.

1850 Post office at Jernigan settlement established.

1857 U.S. Post Office adopts name "Orlando" for county seat near Lake Eola, with four streets around a courthouse square.

1875 Orlando officially incorporates as a town on July 31, with 85 residents.

1880 First railroad arrives from Sanford and parts north.

1883 Jacob Summerlin donates park land around Lake Eola.

1885 Orlando incorporates as a city.

1886 Rogers-Kiene Building begins as club for English settlers.

1894 December chill blasts citrus trees, followed by second freeze in early 1895.

1900 Gus Henderson starts *Florida Christian Recorder*, Orlando's first Black-owned newspaper.

1908 Mrs. W.S. Branch wins Orlando nickname contest with "The City Beautiful."

1913 Equal Suffrage League founded, led by Rev. Mary Safford.

1919 Women vote in Orlando for the first time, on road-paving bond issue.

1920 July Perry lynched in Orlando during Ocoee Massacre on Election Day.

1921 Beacham Theater opens on Orange Avenue.

1922 Jones High School opens on Parramore Ave. as the city's first and only high school for Black students.

1923 Orlando Utilities Commission established; Albertson Public Library opens.

1924 Lake Eola bandstand debuts, designed by Ida Ryan and Isabel Roberts.

1927 "Million dollar" courthouse that now houses the History Center opens, designed by Murry S. King.

1930 Margaret Ekdahl, former Dickson-Ives clerk, becomes Miss America.

1932 Morrison's Cafeteria announces opening on West Central Ave.

1934 Solarium opens on Lake Estelle.

1940 Orlando Army Air Base established.

1943 Second military base, begun 1942, is named Pinecastle Army Air Field.

1951 Jones High School relocates to 801 S. Rio Grande Ave.

1952 William R. Boone and Edgewater high schools open.

1956 Aerospace and defense company Martin Marietta comes to Orlando; Colonial Plaza Shopping Center opens.

1957 Author Jack Kerouac resides in College Park until spring of 1958.

1958 Pinecastle base renamed McCoy Air Force Base after Col. Michael McCoy.

1959 Cuban immigrants begin arriving after Castro's revolution; civil rights leader Father Nelson Pindar arrives at age 27.

1962 Orlando Jetport, precursor of Orlando International Airport, is built from a portion of McCoy Air Force Base.

1964 The Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. speaks in Orlando at Tinker Field in March.

1965 At Cherry Plaza Hotel, Walt Disney announces plans for new theme park.

1968 Florida Technological University opens; Orlando Air Force Base transferred to U.S. Navy to become Naval Training Center.

1971 Walt Disney World opens Oct. 1.

1973 SeaWorld opens Dec. 15.

1974 Bob Snow begins Church Street Station with Rosie O'Grady's.

1975 Golf great Arnold Palmer buys the Bay Hill Club and Lodge.

1978 Florida Technological University becomes University of Central Florida.

1982 EPCOT opens Oct. 1.

1989 Orlando Magic begin play Oct. 13.

1990 Linda Chapin becomes first mayor of Orange County; Universal Studios Florida opens June 7.

1992 Glenda Hood becomes first woman mayor.

1999 Naval Training Center Orlando completes closure by year's end.

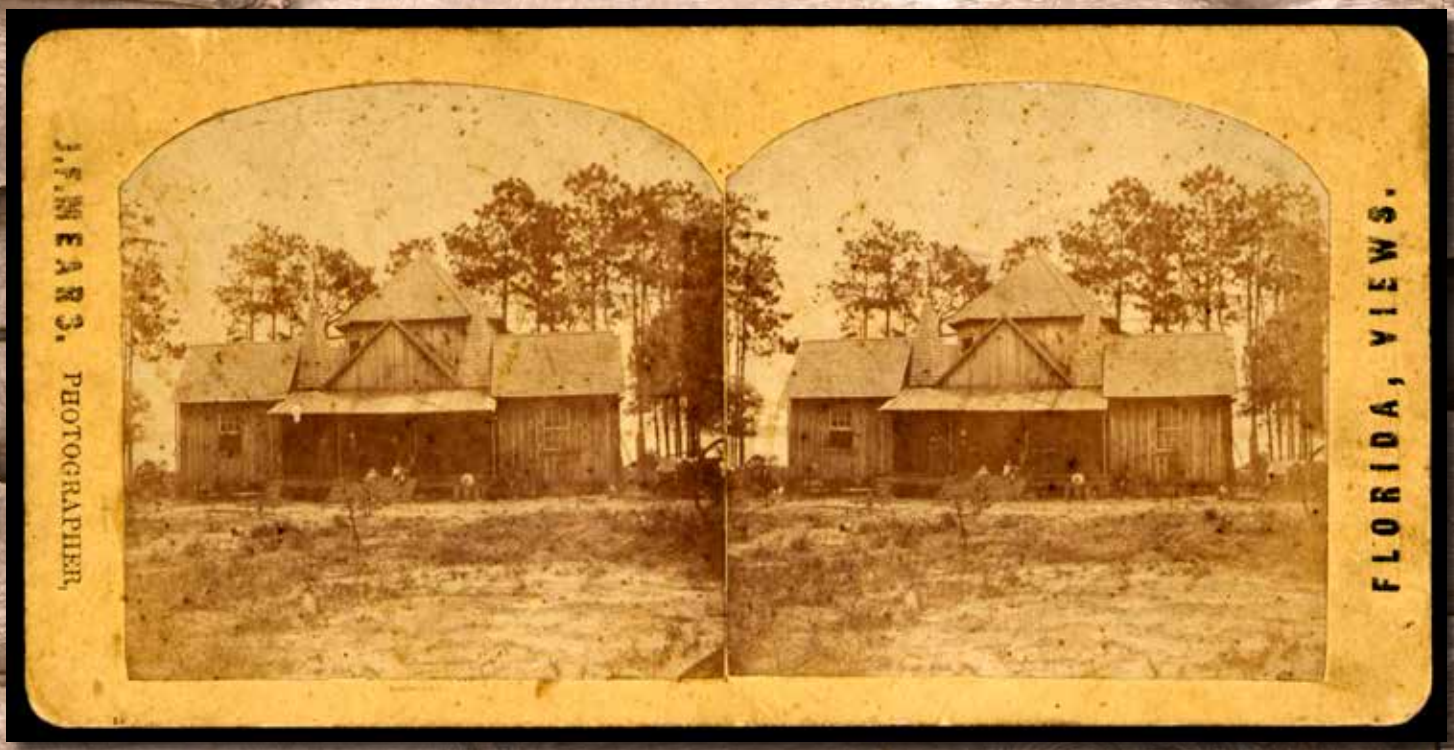
2016 Pulse Nightclub tragedy, June 12.

Above: 1884 promotional map displays streets, the route of the South Florida Railroad, lakes, and the various structures found in Orlando at the time. Just below the center of the map is a picture advertisement for Sinclair's Real Estate Agency.

WILL WALLACE HARNEY

Central Florida's Pioneering One-Man Chamber of Commerce

BY WILLIAM S. MORGAN V



In the tumultuous years following the Civil War, a man arrived on the Central Florida frontier with a vision of how its untamed wilderness might be transformed. Where others saw only dense forests, swamps, and scattered settlements, Will Wallace Harney – a writer, entrepreneur, and visionary – saw a land of opportunity.

Harney's personal efforts to promote Central Florida helped lead to its transformation into a prime destination for agriculture, business, and tourism. In fact, his efforts earned him the reputation of being a one-man chamber of commerce.

FRESH START IN FLORIDA

Harney's story began in Bloomington, Indiana, where he was born to a college mathematics professor and his wife in 1831. His father subsequently gave up academia and moved the family to Louisville, Kentucky, where he became publisher of a popular daily newspaper. So, from an early age, Harney enjoyed an environment that encouraged discussion and the development of thoughts and ideas. Perhaps more importantly, he had a ready outlet for sharing those thoughts and ideas with a broad audience. By the age of 27, his writings – particularly his poetry – were syndicated nationally, gaining him a large and loyal readership.

Like so many others, Harney sought a fresh start after the Civil War. As newlyweds in 1869, he and his bride, Mary Randolph Harney, entered a homestead claim for 160 acres on the Conway chain of lakes just south of Orlando. It remains a picturesque spot, but in those days its natural beauty was even more striking, with clear waters, lush vegetation, and a mild climate. To Harney, this was not just a wilderness. It was a landscape brimming with potential, ripe for transformation.

Harney's vision was clear from the start: Central Florida was a place where settlers could enjoy both economic prosperity and personal fulfilment far from the crowded and industrialized cities of the North. Unlike many who viewed the region's subtropical climate as challenging or even hostile, he embraced it. He recognized that the fertile soil, extended growing seasons, and natural resources could make his new home a hub for agriculture and trade. All it needed was a champion, someone who could broadcast its possibilities to the outside world. Harney took on that role with gusto.

FOCUS ON CITRUS AND LOCAL INFRASTRUCTURE

Harney began his one-man marketing campaign by focusing on agriculture, particularly citrus. At the time, the idea of growing oranges on a large scale was still relatively new. Harney was ahead of that curve. He planted one of the area's earliest commercial groves, experimenting with different varieties to find the best fit for local conditions.

But Harney did more than plant orange trees. He became an ambassador for the nascent citrus industry. His syndicated writings shifted from poetry and puff pieces to serious and engaging articles about citrus cultivation. He shared his personal insights and experiences in national newspapers and popular magazines such as the *New York Times* and *Harper's Weekly*. His vivid descriptions of lush groves, bountiful harvests, and the sweet fragrance of orange blossoms painted a picture of paradise that captivated the imagination of readers seeking their own new starts.

Harney's articles were practical, too. He detailed how to grow oranges with tips on planting, irrigation, and pest control. By demystifying the process, he made it easier for newcomers to consider citrus farming a viable option. This helped lay the foundation for what would become one of Florida's most important industries. Even after a century and a half of growth and economic diversification, the state remains synonymous with oranges. And much of that success can be traced back to pioneers like Harney who believed in the potential of citrus.

Harney also understood that Central Florida needed more than successful farmers. The region needed infrastructure. Roads, railways, and ports were essential for transporting goods and attracting settlers. Not surprisingly, he became a vocal advocate for improved transportation networks. He began peppering his writings with calls to build connections that would link the region to major markets in the North.

He heralded the arrival of the South Florida Railroad in the early 1880s as a turning point. The rail line connected Central Florida's new interior groves to the steamboat landings on Lake Monroe, making it easier for farmers to transport their goods – particularly perishable citrus fruits – to markets across the country. This connection opened new opportunities for trade and commerce, transforming Orlando from a sleepy county seat into an accessible and attractive hub of activity.

CRAFTING A COMPELLING NARRATIVE

What set Harney apart from other early promoters was his ability to effectively communicate his vision through storytelling. Beyond how-to articles about agriculture and opinion pieces seeking infrastructure improvements, he also succeeded in capturing the nation's interest in Central Florida by depicting the lives of the area's colorful and inspiring residents. These stories crafted an even more compelling narrative about the region's potential, dispelling myths and misconceptions while highlighting its many advantages. For instance, he often emphasized how mild winters made it possible to grow

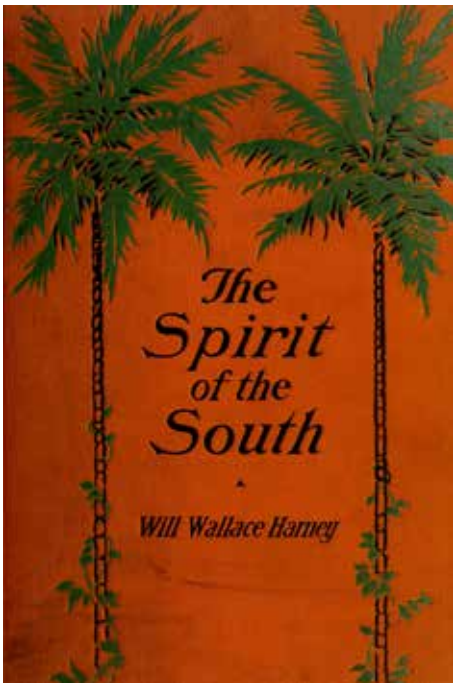
Opposite page: Stereoview of the front of Will Wallace Harney's home, dubbed the Pine Castle. Above: A view of the back of the Pine Castle.

crops year-round—an attractive and novel prospect for readers shivering in colder climates.

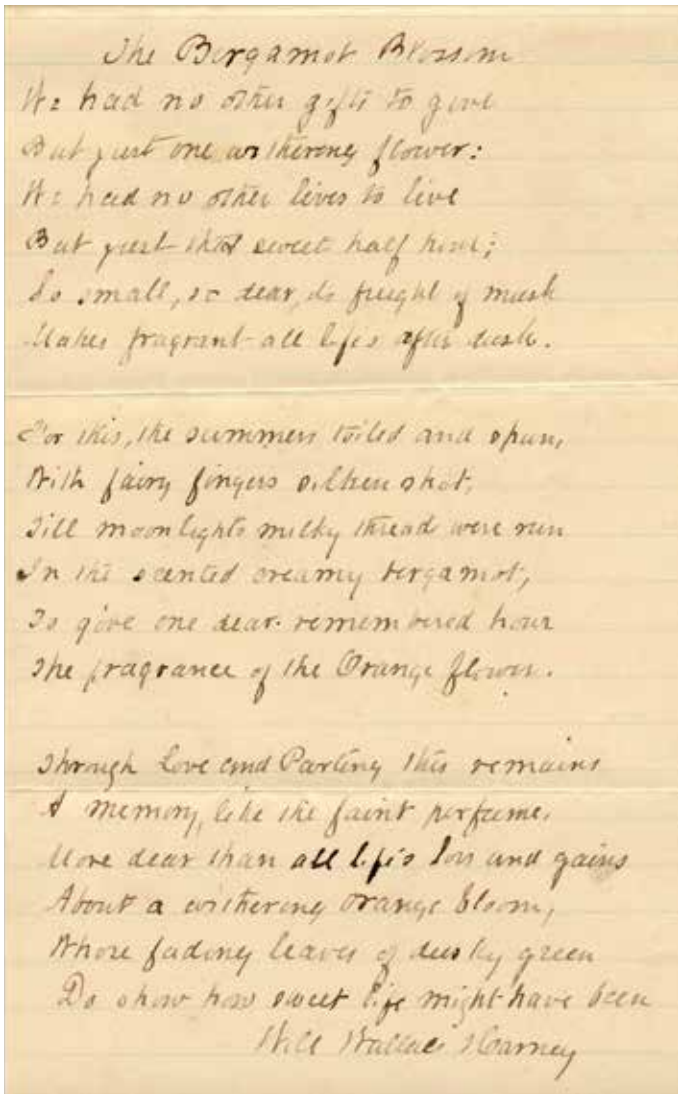
Some of Harney's most memorable character sketches from the Central Florida frontier featured William Glover, a freedman from South Carolina who established one of the most successful farms in the county near the modern site of Boone High School in Orlando. Another neighbor, Jack Barber, eluded a string of trumped-up charges by simply vanishing into the wilderness on an extended hunting expedition. And a trio of "penniless" immigrants – William Jones, Marshall Porter, and Jesse Bumby – reaped rich rewards as they formed the nucleus of an "English colony."

Harney's promotional efforts were not limited to print. He was a master networker whose social circle included literary luminaries such as Mark Twain, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and John Greenleaf Whittier. Through these connections, he extended invitations to prominent journalists, politicians, and business leaders to personally tour Central Florida. Perhaps most notable was the "Western Party" that sojourned at his Pine Castle homestead on its way to the Everglades in April 1874. Members included wealthy banker Ingram Fletcher and correspondents from the *New York Times* and the *Indianapolis Herald*. By showing them firsthand what Orange County had to offer, Harney turned them into advocates who helped build a positive image of the region. In fact, Fletcher eventually made Orlando his permanent home, encouraging others to take the leap.

While Harney was focused on economic growth, he also had a deep appreciation for Central Florida's natural beauty. He understood part of the region's appeal was its environment, the lakes, forests, and wetlands that made it unique. All were depicted regularly in his writings, especially in his poetry. Some of his best-remembered poems include "Florida Dawn," "Milking Time," "Nooning in Florida," "Old Canoe," and "Over the Sugar Kettles."



Will Wallace Harney's *The Spirit of the South* was published in 1909.


The Bergamot Blossom

He had no other gift to give
But just one wayside flower:
He had no other lives to live
But just that sweet half hour;
So small, so dear, its fragrant mark
Makes fragrant all life's after dark.

For this, the summer toiled and spun,
With fairy fingers silken shot;
Till moonlight milky thread were run
In the scented creamy bergamot;
To give one dear remembered hour
The fragrance of the Orange flower.

Through Love and Parting this remains
A memory, like the faint perfume,
More dear than all life's loss and gains
About a withering orange bloom,
Where fading leaves of dusky green
Do show how sweet life might have been

Will Wallace Harney

State Archives of Florida

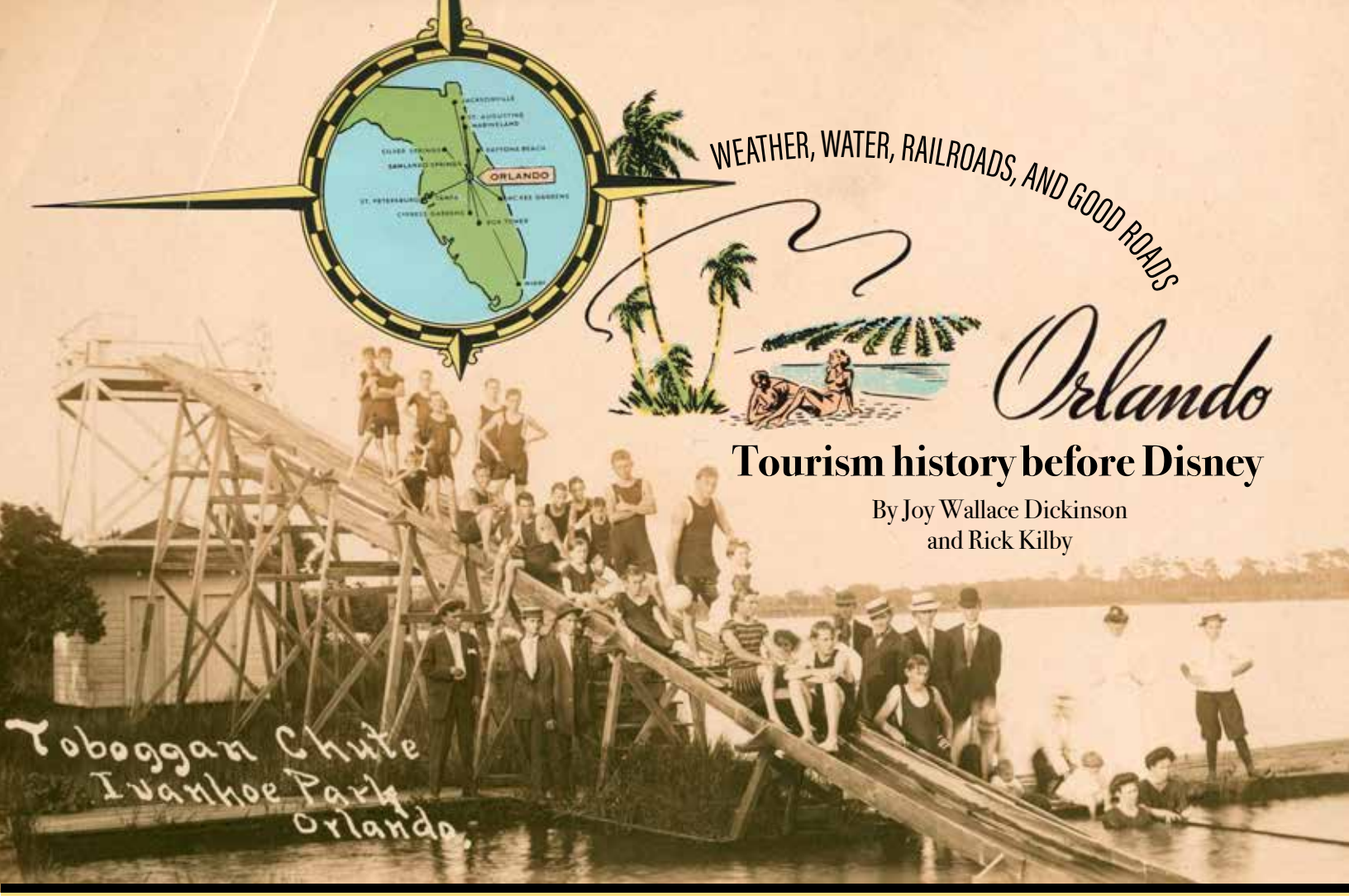
An 1898 letter from Will Wallace Harney to Maria R. Fletcher ends with one of his poems, "The Bergamot Blossom."

A LONG LEGACY

Harney died in 1912 at age 80, having lived to see Central Florida make great strides from its pioneer roots. He now rests beside his beloved wife Mary at Greenwood Cemetery near downtown Orlando. Though their home, named the Pine Castle, was destroyed by fire many years ago, its importance – not to mention its evocative name and whimsical style – has been memorialized in the name of a thriving community and by a series of historical markers and countless other tributes over the years.

Today, Central Florida is known for its bustling cities, theme parks, multiculturalism, and tech savvy. But behind the modern skyline and suburban sprawl lies the legacy of Will Wallace Harney – the man who saw potential where others saw only wilderness, and who dedicated his life to turning that potential into reality. As a one-man chamber of commerce, he didn't just promote the region; he helped build it – one article, one grove, and one connection at a time. His story is a testament to the power of vision and the impact one person can have on the development of an entire region. ■

Note: For further reading, see William S. Morgan V, ed., *A Pine Castle Anthology: The Collected Writings of Will Wallace Harney* (Orlando, 2010).



WEATHER, WATER, RAILROADS, AND GOOD ROADS

Orlando

Tourism history before Disney

By Joy Wallace Dickinson
and Rick Kilby

Above: In 1910, George Russell built an entertainment destination for Orlandoans on Lake Ivanhoe called Russell's Point – the first water park in Orlando. It was later renamed Joyland. Below: A train steams through downtown Orlando, just north of Church Street, circa 1920s.

"With the coming of the railroad Orlando's days as a pioneer town were numbered," historian Eve Bacon wrote about the event that made Orlando accessible from Sanford and in essence all points north, by train and steamboat. Before the first train arrived on Oct. 2, 1880, a journey to Orlando, Florida's largest inland city, required rugged travel over crude roads on horseback, by stagecoach, or on foot. When future Orlando mayor Mahlon Gore first arrived in the spring of 1880, it took him two days to walk from Sanford. These were not conditions to encourage prospective settlers or recreational visitors to pay a call.

But, according to Bacon, the railroad led to a boom that inspired the construction of a three-story brick hotel, the Charleston House, at Orange Avenue and Pine Street, at a time when some complained bricks were so scarce that it was hard to construct a chimney. The Charleston House became the site of future balls, banquets, and political gatherings, leading a westward shift in the city's commercial center, away from Main Street and the county courthouse and closer to Orange Avenue.

Fueled by the railroad, Orlando experienced its first population surge, mushrooming from about 200 people in 1880 to 4,000 by 1886, despite a destructive fire in 1884. Boosters dubbed it the Phenomenal City, built on the peel of an orange, a vision dimmed when the back-to-back freezes of late 1894 and early 1895 devastated citrus crops.

While early northern tourists wintered in nearby Winter Park and Altamonte Springs at luxury resort hotels located on lakes, Orlando would offer lakeside accommodations for northern visitors of a different type. Seeking relief from icy winters, they sought out Orlando for health reasons after physician R.L. Harris

The San Juan Hotel, before the addition was constructed in 1922.

opened a sanitarium between lakes Estelle and Winyah near the turn of the century.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church, which popularized health-care regimens such as hydrotherapy, physical exercise, and healthy eating at the famous Battle Creek Sanitarium, purchased the facility from Harris in 1908. Decades later, the Adventists' Florida Sanitarium would grow into today's Advent Health.

Orlando's lakes would also become a draw for visitors who traveled to Florida for hunting and fishing. Orange County's prolific promoter Will Wallace Harney bragged, "I have known of twenty fish, none less than a foot long, taken in forty minutes, which allowing for time for removing the hook and baiting it as fast as one can fish them up."

Boating also became popular. Members of the short-lived English Colony organized sailing regattas at their club on Lake Conway. Guests at the nearby Macy Hotel used the Crittenden Dock on the big lake for boating and fishing, and Pleasure Beach became a popular recreation spot with a long dock and bathing pavilion for dancing, skating, and gambling. Further north on Lake Ivanhoe, Russell's Point, later advertised as Joyland, offered boating, fishing, swimming, and dancing and was likely the location of Orlando's first waterslide.

All Roads Lead to Orlando

"Orlando proudly claims the distinction of having taken the initiative in the organized Good Roads agitation," declared a 1913 promotion for the "beautiful city" that invited visitors to "bring your auto and enjoy our good roads."

Begun in the late 19th century as a coalition of farming interests and bicycle enthusiasts, the Good Roads Movement was a nationwide crusade that grew as automobile travel became popular in the early 20th century. It culminated in the creation of marked interstate road systems such as the Lincoln and Dixie highways. Organized by Miami Beach promoter Carl Fisher in late 1914, the Dixie Highway system had two initial north-south alignments, the western-most route of which bisected downtown Orlando.

Left: Sketch of the Florida Sanitarum. Above: Sailboat at Lake Conway.

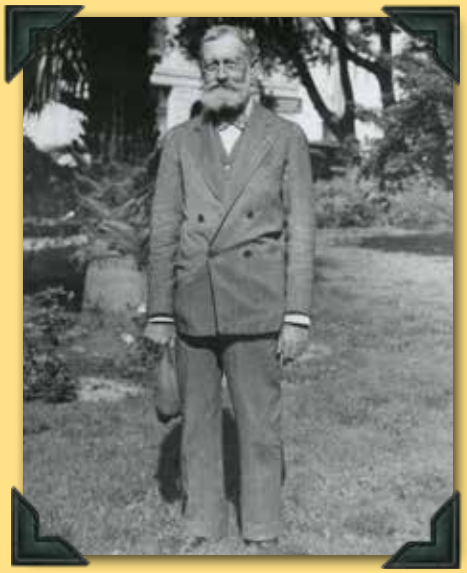
Just a few years after Henry Ford's Model T made the dream of automobile ownership accessible to many Americans, more people could reach Orlando than ever before. In the early 1920s especially, they drove down in a wave fueled by the Florida land boom. "It looked like the world on wheels was coming to Florida," wrote Orlando developer Carl Dann.

These auto travelers did not stay in posh resorts or dine in luxury. They often depended on their own resourcefulness and favored budget travel. Dubbed "Tin Can Tourists" either for their mode of transportation (Model T Fords were nicknamed Tin Lizzies) or their penchant for bringing along their own canned food, these new travelers

soon organized and began staying in campgrounds and tourist courts around the state. Hoteliers and restaurant owners weren't impressed, and some Floridians were inspired to quip that many auto travelers arrived from the North with one shirt and one $20 bill – and, during their stay, changed neither.

Orlando embraced the Tin Canners somewhat grudgingly. According to a 1921 *Orlando Sentinel* article, the Chamber of Commerce advised that the camping tourist "should not be treated in a hostile manner" but should be "welcomed as any other visitor to the Peninsular State, able to pay his way and forced to do so." Entrepreneurs such as Harry Hand, brother of funeral-home owner Carey Hand, embraced the motoring hordes by opening tourist camps, in Hand's case between South Street and Central Boulevard – the site of today's Carl Langford Park.

In contrast to the tolerated campers, some visitors achieved celebrity status in Orlando, where their arrivals were reported with fanfare. In 1929, the *Orlando Evening Star* referred to New Jersey financier John Jay Phelps, a dedicated snowbird, as "a very wealthy and socially prominent gentleman" who "influences a considerable number of tourists to come here each season." Phelps and his wife wintered in Orlando from the 1920s until the year he died, 1948, when the *Sentinel* noted that his annual fall appearance had long signaled the start of the year's social season.



Top: Early Orlando motorists. Center: Horse-drawn advertisement for Orlando in Tampa in the 1890s. Above: Financer John Jay Phelps.

Towering Hotels and Tourist Courts

The early 1920s also brought a boom in more traditional accommodations as Orlando saw its first "skyscrapers" in downtown. In 1922, an eight-story tower was added to the original 1885 portion of the San Juan Hotel, which owner Harry L. Beeman of chewing gum fame had enlarged to four floors in 1887. The Angebilt Hotel, named after developer J.F. Ange, offered 240 guest rooms in a million-dollar structure designed by local architect Murry S. King. A more modest, three-story building on Lake Eola, the Bonnie Villa Hotel, opened in 1924, showing the viability of accommodations outside the city center. It soon became a medical clinic but would become a hotel several more times over the years, most recently as the Eo Inn.

Other accommodations were less grand, such as Hovey's Court, a collection of nine two-story Arts and Crafts-style guest cottages, built between 1913 and 1919 at 545 Delaney Ave. Black travelers had few choices for accommodations during the Jim Crow era until Orlando physician William Monroe Wells opened the Wells Bilt Hotel in 1929 (now the Wells'Built Museum). Wells also constructed the nearby South Street Casino, an entertainment venue that over decades hosted performances by artists including Louis Armstrong, Ray Charles, and Ella Fitzgerald.

While automobile traffic had changed travel patterns to Orlando, railroad travel remained significant. In 1926 the Atlantic Coastline Railway built the expansive California Mission-style station on Sligh Boulevard that continues to serve rail passengers today.

Another important addition to Orlando's tourist landscape in the 1920s was the opening of the Dubsdread Golf Course in 1924 by developer Carl Dann. He expanded the course in 1926 to include 18 holes, and the Florida State Golfers Association's 13th Annual Amateur Golf Championship was played there in 1927, about the time the Florida land boom began to collapse. The Sunshine State experienced the financial crash that would hit Wall Street in 1929 earlier than much of the country, after the 1926 Miami hurricane and the 1928 Okeechobee hurricane caused damage that bankrupted investors. Growth in Florida came crashing down as the nation lapsed into the Great Depression at the end of the decade.

Above: Hovey's Court, a collection of Arts and Crafts-style cottages. Below, top: City Beautiful Tourist Home on Lake Lucerne. Below left: Billboard for Jefferson Court Hotel and Apartments. Below, right: Sign for Orlando Tourist Headquarters.

Depression and Wartime

In an effort to stimulate the economy during the Great Depression, the federal government created a guidebook to Florida as part of the of the Federal Writers Project – employing now-legendary writers such as Zora Neale Hurston and Stetson Kennedy to document the state's culture and create driving tours for visitors.

The Orlando section of the book, published in 1939, lists recreational facilities for baseball, swimming, tennis, golf, shuffleboard, lawn bowling, and roque, which is similar to croquet. The venue for the last three sports was Sunshine Park, which included large recreational grounds, the Municipal Auditorium, and Exposition Park, home of the Central Florida Exposition. Outdoor recreation and sports were a constant point of emphasis throughout the history of Orlando tourism promotion, from Major League Baseball spring training at Tinker Field to bass fishing in the nearby lakes.

Other points of interest in the 1939 guidebook include Lake Eola Park and the Orlando Zoo at Livingston Avenue and Garland Street. The section on Lake Eola offers a brief history of Orlando's swans, including the fearsome "Mr. Bill," known today as Billy the Swan, who died in the early 1930s and was preserved by taxidermy and displayed at the city's Chamber of Commerce when the guidebook was published. (Billy is now in the Orange County Regional History Center's collections.)

In 1940, the United States Army assumed control of the Orlando Municipal Airport, which had opened in 1928, and transformed it into Orlando Army Air Base. Another facility, Pinecastle Army Airfield, would open farther south in 1942 on that land that ultimately would become the Orlando International Airport. The infrastructure created during the war made the region more accessible for future visitors. More importantly, thousands of GIs who lived and trained in Florida would return after the war to visit or become new residents, and as historian Tracy Revels notes, the "image of Florida as a vacation destination for families began to dominate the public perception of the Sunshine State."

A tourism survivor from those postwar years began in 1949, when Owen Godwin Sr. opened the Florida Wildlife Institute, now known as Gatorland, on U.S. Highway 441 near the Osceola County line. Created on land used for borrow pits dug to provide dirt for the roadbed, the 110-acre attraction celebrated its 75th anniversary in 2024 and is still family owned.

During the postwar years, the portion of U.S. 441 in Orlando was dubbed the Orange Blossom Trail, playing off the popularity of Florida's most popular agricultural product. A.C. Slaughter, secretary-manager of the Greater Orlando Chamber of Commerce, was one of the founders and long-time president of the Orange Blossom Trail Association. A brochure for Orlando's Fort Gatlin Hotel devotes an entire spread to the Trail and urges visitors to follow the highway of rolling hills "past thousands of green and golden orange groves."

Citrus, perhaps the state's most important crop, was itself an attraction with countless scenes of orange groves appearing on postcards sent back home. Roadside citrus stands took advantage of the highway hordes visiting each winter.

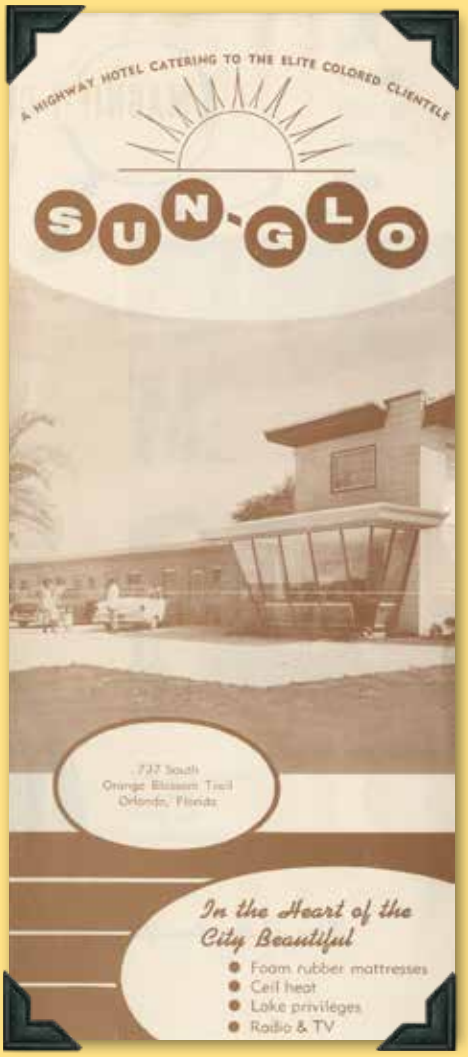
In addition to attractions such as Gatorland, other buildings sprouted up along Central Florida's roads during the postwar period – this was the age of the motel. Tourist corridors followed highways 17 and 92, as well as U. S. 441, and all three roads followed the same route through much of Orlando.

The Mills Avenue stretch of 17-92 boasted the Flamingo Court Motel, Orlando Motor Lodge, Crescent Court Motel, and Motel South. The roadway then followed Colonial Drive to the Orange Blossom Trail with more motels, including the Davis Park Motel, the Gifford Arms Motel and Motor Lodge, and the Royal Motel, all of which still stand today but have been renamed. Today, however, Orlando's best-known motel from the past may be the Wigwam Village on the South Orange Blossom Trail.

Built in 1947 and demolished in 1973, Orlando's Wigwam Village at 700 S. Orange Blossom Trail was among seven similar "tourist courts" across the country. They all followed a design Frank A. Redford patented in 1937 after he opened the first one in Horse Cave, Kentucky. Orlando's was the largest, with 27 concrete-cone units arranged in a horseshoe and four more facing the highway. Of the seven Wigwam Villages, the three that survive – in San Bernardino, California, Cave City, Kentucky, and on U.S. Route 66 in Holbrook, Arizona – are all on the National Register of Historic Places.

Above right: Orange Blossom Trail logo. Above: A Gatorland employee holds a large snake at the Orlando attraction in the 1960s.

In their postwar heyday, such motels represented the freedom of the open road for many tourists – a freedom not extended to African American travelers during the era of segregation. To find the few accommodations available to them, Black visitors turned to a publication titled *The Negro Motorist Green Book*. The 1956 edition listed only two places to stay in Orlando: the Wells Bilt Hotel and the Sun-Glo Motel, on the Orange Blossom Trail, which opened in 1955 and advertised itself as "A Highway Hotel Catering to the Elite Colored Clientele."



Above: Brochure for the Sun-Glo Hotel, which billed itself as a "highway hotel catering to the elite colored clientele." Above, right: Orlando's Wigwam Motel was located on the Orange Bossom Trail. Right: A train speeds by the Orlando railroad depot, before it was renovated as part of Bob Snow's Church Street Station complex.

From Agriculture to Tourist Culture

A series of devastating freezes in the 20th century helped pave the way for today's tourism-based economy in Central Florida. When Walt Disney officially announced his plans for Disney World at downtown Orlando's Cherry Plaza Hotel in 1965, Orlando had been rolling out the red carpet for winter visitors for more than 80 years. Warm temperatures and glorious sunshine were a factor in Disney's decision to locate his new attraction in the area, but it was the once again convenient transportation that sealed the deal. Flying over the location where the Florida Turnpike intersected Interstate 4, Disney imagined throngs of motorists heading south on speedy highways. Those same modern roads, however, diverted traffic from colorful "blue highways" such as U.S. 441 and 17-92, and many of the mom-and-pop motels and restaurants that defined the roadside experience at midcentury later fell by the wayside.

With Disney came other attractions hoping to get their slice of the tourist pie in the 1970s, including Church Street Station in downtown Orlando. Bob Snow, the nighttime attraction's creator, chose the Church Street location because of its proximity to the then-derelict historic train depot, ironically the same place where visitors once took their first steps in the City Beautiful. ■

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.

Dateline downtown Orlando

In trying to attribute a date to a photograph, historians often are left to rely exclusively on visual clues when no other relevant information is available. Take, for example, this curious scene in downtown Orlando at precisely 5 p.m. sometime during the Roaring 1920s.

Crowds have gathered at the intersection of Orange Avenue and Central Boulevard in anticipation of some unseen event. Spectators are even making their way onto the second-story overhang and sitting in the open windows of the Yowell-Drew Building.

The number of children present suggests the possibility of a parade, and the shining sun at that time of day, as well as the clothes people are wearing, points to a time of warm weather.

From the presence of the State Bank of Orlando and Trust Company, we know that this photo was taken in 1924 at the earliest. This was the year the bank opened at 1 N. Orange Ave. We also know the photo can be from no later than 1929, when the bank closed.

There is one clue that truly narrows down for us an approximate date. In the middle of the intersection, an officer stands next to a small traffic signal. In July 1925, a four-ton traffic tower with an observation perch was installed at this intersection. Therefore, we know that this photo was taken between early 1924 when the State Bank of Orlando and Trust Company opened and the traffic tower's installation in July 1925.

Finally, the presence of flowers on some of the hats worn by women allows for one final theory. On Friday, April 25, 1924, the second annual State Floral Parade made its way through downtown Orlando beginning at 4:30 p.m. Starting on the corner of Rosalind and Central, the parade worked its way around Lake Eola to Lake Lucerne, and then north up Orange Avenue. By 5 p.m., the parade would most likely be a good distance from this intersection, but spectators would be jockeying for their spots.

Without definitive proof and only the use of visual clues, we can at least make an educated guess! ■

Jonestown's Silent Remembrance

Uncovering the History of Orlando's First African American Community

The life of Osborne Brooks, who is buried in Greenwood Cemetery, reveals much about Orlando during the era of segregation.

By Sarah M. Boye

On a breezy fall day, a group of tour attendees stood solemnly by the grave of Osborne Brooks in Orlando's Greenwood Cemetery, listening as the tour guide explained his family's connection to the city. Like many Black residents of Orlando born in the early 20th century, Brooks lived in Jonestown, one of three segregated zones of the city. When he was born in 1915, Jonestown was a vibrant neighborhood, full of families who lived and worked in nearby downtown Orlando. Due to the conventions of white supremacy, they were kept on what was then the outskirts of the City Beautiful.

Much like the city itself during the Jim Crow era, Greenwood was also segregated, albeit within the cemetery gates. Black residents were relegated to one of three sections of the cemetery. Osborne Brooks's grave lies in the northeast corner of section three in Greenwood, next to Isabell Demps, his aunt. His mother, Sophronia Brooks, is buried there in an unmarked grave. Relegated to the outskirts of Orlando in life, and nearly forgotten in death, Brooks and his family are a poignant reminder of Jonestown, Orlando's first Black neighborhood, and its residents.

Segregated in death

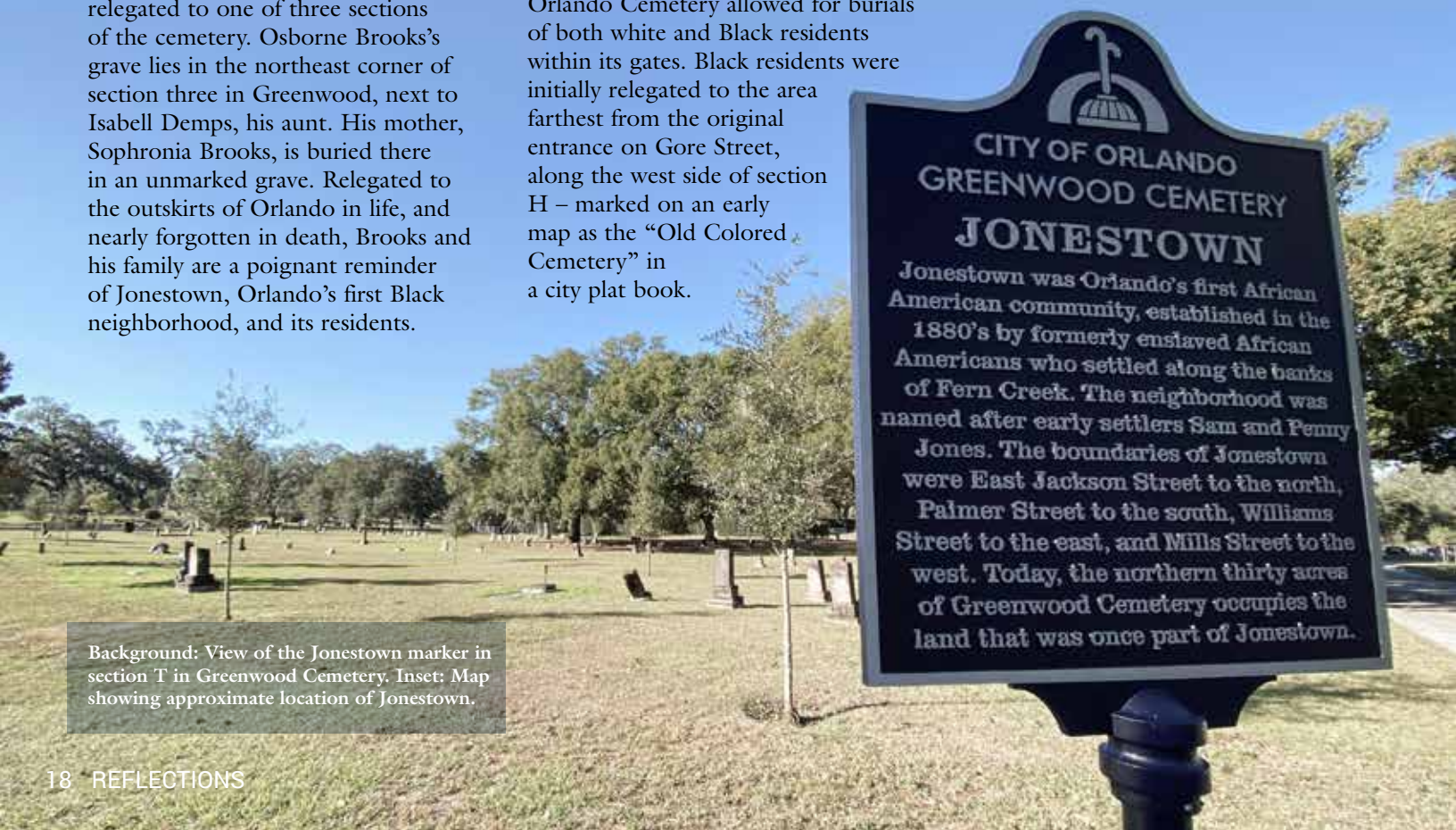
Jonestown was established in the 1880s just outside the city's southern boundary. As Orlando and Jonestown developed, eight pioneer Orlando residents formed the Orlando Cemetery Company and purchased 40 acres of land south of Jonestown, down the hill and out of sight of the City of Orlando.

Most unusually at the time, the Orlando Cemetery allowed for burials of both white and Black residents within its gates. Black residents were initially relegated to the area farthest from the original entrance on Gore Street, along the west side of section H – marked on an early map as the "Old Colored Cemetery" in a city plat book.

In 1893, one year after the City of Orlando purchased the cemetery from its founders, segregation of those buried there was codified in the first city ordinances that included the new municipal cemetery. As Orlando added more acreage to the cemetery, the segregated sections moved northward to just outside Jonestown's southern boundary.

Magruder's influence and the 1915 flood

Many of Jonestown's early residents worked for James Magruder, a white man who owned numerous business ventures in Orlando, including the Empire Hotel and the Lucerne Theater. By 1890, Magruder had developed a subdivision for his



Background: View of the Jonestown marker in section T in Greenwood Cemetery. Inset: Map showing approximate location of Jonestown.

Sarah M. Boye

employees that extended from South Street to Palmer Avenue and contained 160 lots. Due to issues with flooding from a nearby sinkhole (now known as Lake Greenwood), residents began moving northward, establishing their own subdivisions, named after Jonestown residents such as the Rev. George Washington Coar or Black heroes such as civil rights icon Frederick Douglass.

Just one month after Osborne Brooks was born, an immense rainfall submerged Jonestown in October 1915. Many of the one-story, tin-roofed homes in Magruder's subdivision flooded to their rooflines. Magruder lost 20 pigs and hogs on his agricultural properties in Jonestown.

The *Orlando Morning Sentinel* reported that the pig pen was carried across the newly formed lake but neglected to mention the fate of Jonestown residents affected by the 1915 flood, which wreaked far more havoc than merely washing away animal pens. On November 10, a plague of tiny frogs overtook Jonestown. The *Sentinel* declared that the frogs, who were "largely in their element in Jonestown," were "seen in innumerable numbers, piled upon one another, several inches deep." It was in these unfortunate conditions that Bert and Sophronia Brooks welcomed their son Osborne that November.

The year 1915 brought other local developments, which included changing the name of the cemetery to Greenwood Cemetery to better align with Orlando's motto, "The City Beautiful." However, as young Osborne grew up in the wake of such destruction and segregation, the meaning of that motto would be put to the test.

Life in Jonestown

Young Osborne Brooks likely attended the nearby "Colored School" on Newman Avenue, where he learned to read by the glow of oil lamps, and worshipped at Mount Olive Christian Methodist Episcopal Church on South Street. Both of his parents worked at the South Florida Foundry on West Pine Street and created the ironwork that was used in the construction of Orlando.

Though the Brooks family owned their home in 1920 on East South Street, by the end of the decade they moved several times, suggesting some economic instability. In 1929, when Osborne was just 13 years old, his mother, Sophronia, died of pneumonia and was buried in "strangers' row" of section K in Greenwood Cemetery. After her death, Osborne's father, Bert, went to Jacksonville, likely to look for work, and left Osborne in the care of his maternal aunts, Isabell and Bertha.

As he visited his mother's gravesite in Greenwood Cemetery with his aunts in the weeks following her death, Osborne likely would have heard the familiar strains of "Dixie" played on Confederate Memorial Day. Each April, just down the hill

Top: Headstone of Osborne Brooks, born in 1915 in Jonestown, Orlando's first African American community. Below: The sinkhole, now known as Lake Greenwood, would regularly flood the community of Jonestown until a drainage system was established. This photo could be from any Jonestown flood between the 1880s and 1904.

from Sophronia Brooks's final resting place, the United Daughters of the Confederacy decorated the graves of Civil War soldiers, in proximity to Orlando's first Black neighborhood.

Growing up, Osborne Brooks undoubtedly encountered the oppression of systemic racism that was the standard of life in Orlando during the early 20th century. Throughout his formative years, the Ku Klux Klan had resurfaced to terrorize Black residents. By 1931, white supremacy was so mainstream that 60 white-robed Klan members marched just outside Jonestown alongside veterans and Scout troops in the Armistice Day parade.

Sadly, within three years of his mother's death, in 1932, Osborne Brooks was left an orphan when his father died of heart failure. In Jacksonville, Bert Brooks was buried in Lone Star Cemetery – like his wife, in an unmarked grave.

Osborne continued his schooling and likely attended Jones High School, the only public high school available to Orlando's Black students. In 1933 he was among the first few classes of students to graduate from the 12th grade at the segregated high school.

The demise of Jonestown

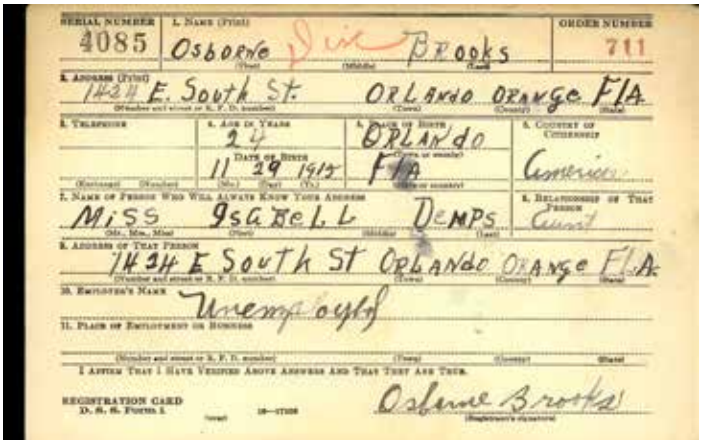
By 1935, the Magruder family had amassed an enormous tax debt and in exchange transferred their 30-acre subdivision in Jonestown to the City of Orlando. The city promptly used this property to expand Greenwood Cemetery to the north. At the same time, white-owned subdivisions were growing around the once-vibrant Black community. White residents publicly complained about Jonestown's proximity to their properties and called for the removal of its residents.

Two disasters assisted these belligerent white Orlandoans in their efforts to remove their Black neighbors. First, a fire destroyed a home and killed a man in Jonestown on Nov. 19, 1938, and in February 1939 white residents protested the permit needed for rebuilding. The same month, the Orlando Housing Authority announced plans to remove Jonestown, which the *Orlando Morning Sentinel* called "a cancer which has long gnawed at the vitals of various city administrations." Finally, in October 1939, a sinkhole collapsed at the corner of East South and Quincy streets, near the home Osborne Brooks had shared with his aunt Isabell Demps, furthering efforts to condemn nearby properties.

By 1939, Orlando's segregation zoning ordinances had relegated Black residents to three neighborhoods: Holden, Callahan, and Jonestown. Overcrowding in these areas made relocation difficult for residents, so a low-income housing project, Griffin Park, was built to encourage Jonestown's residents to leave. The Orlando Housing Authority pushed forward with plans to replace the remaining portions of Jonestown with low-income housing for white residents. In total, 48 homes, Mount Olive CME Church, and a store were condemned as slums and demolished to make way for that housing, named Reeves Terrace, in 1942.

Around this time, just a few short weeks before the attack on Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941, Osborne Brooks escaped the destruction of his home and enlisted in the United States Army Air Force. He went on to serve in the "Double Victory" campaign that aimed to end fascism worldwide and racism at home during World War II. The U.S. military was segregated during the war, but due to his education, Brooks rose to the rank of sergeant in Squadron C of the 336th Army Air Force Base Unit. As a sergeant he played a crucial role in the smooth operation of his squadron's missions, combining leadership with technical expertise. His duties would have been an integral contribution to the war effort despite the systemic challenges of segregation. He served through the entire war and was honorably discharged on Oct. 7, 1945.

Top: Men at the South Florida Foundry and Machine Co. circa 1890s. Both of Osborne Brooks's parents worked at the foundry. One Black man is seen in the center of the photo, but his identity is unknown. Bottom left: A boat in the sinkhole that is now known as Lake Greenwood. Bottom right: Lake Greenwood today.



SERIAL NUMBER 4085 — ORDER NUMBER 711

1. NAME (First) Osborne (Middle) Dix (Last) Brooks

2. ADDRESS (Print) 1424 E. South St. Orlando Orange Fla

3. TELEPHONE

4. AGE IN YEARS 24 — DATE OF BIRTH 11 29 1917

5. PLACE OF BIRTH Orlando Fla

6. COUNTY OF CITIZENSHIP American

7. NAME OF PERSON WHO WILL ALWAYS KNOW YOUR ADDRESS Miss Isabell Demps

8. RELATIONSHIP OF THAT PERSON Aunt

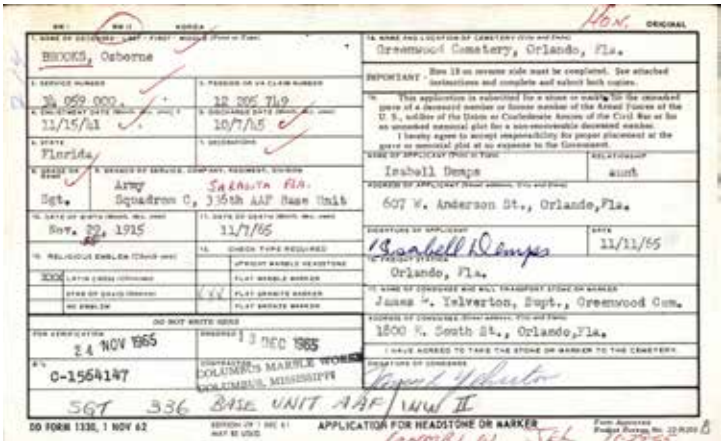
8. ADDRESS OF THAT PERSON 1424 E South St Orlando Orange Fla

10. EMPLOYER'S NAME Unemployed

11. PLACE OF EMPLOYMENT OR BUSINESS

I AFFIRM THAT I HAVE VERIFIED ABOVE ANSWERS AND THAT THEY ARE TRUE.

REGISTRATION CARD D. S. S. FORM 1 — Osborne Brooks



BROOKS, Osborne

Army — Sarasota Fla. — Sgt. — Squadron C, 336th AAF Base Unit

Nov. 22, 1915 — 11/7/65

Greenwood Cemetery, Orlando, Fla.

Isabell Demps — aunt — 607 W. Anderson St., Orlando, Fla. — 11/11/65

Orlando, Fla.

James F. Ivlerton, Supt., Greenwood Cem. — 1500 N. South St., Orlando, Fla.

24 NOV 1965 — 3 DEC 1965 — C-1564147 — COLUMBUS MARBLE WORKS, COLUMBUS, MISSISSIPPI

SGT 336 BASE UNIT AAF WW II

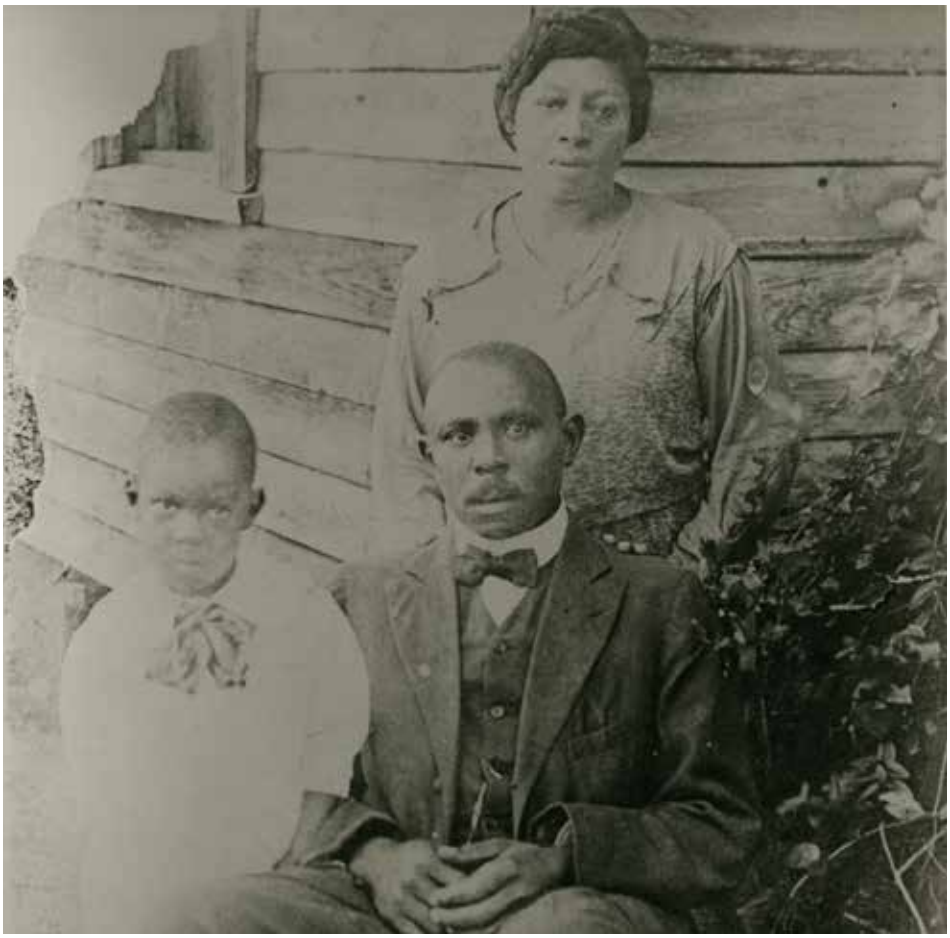
DO FORM 1338, 1 NOV 62 — APPLICATION FOR HEADSTONE OR MARKER

When he returned from his military service in World War II, Osborne Brooks would see that Jonestown was a shadow of its former self. The all-white Reeves Terrace had grown, but by 1951 only 11 families were still living in Jonestown. Brooks and his aunt Isabell moved to the Holden neighborhood, nearer to the Orlando Drive-In Theater, where he worked as a janitor.

As the years passed, more longtime residents of Jonestown left, until in 1962, Brooks's one-time neighbor Virginia Spellman died, and the city acquired her property. This prompted the only other remaining Jonestown resident, Mattie Young, to sell her home to the city, officially ending the lifespan of Orlando's first Black neighborhood.

Three short years later, Osborne Brooks was admitted to the Florida Sanitarium and Hospital, where he died on Nov. 7, 1965, just shy of his 50th birthday. He was buried in section three of Greenwood Cemetery on land that was once Jonestown. Sections three, K, and T remained segregated until a complaint by the NAACP in 1967 repealed the ordinance requiring segregated burials in the cemetery.

Today, Osborne Brooks's and Jonestown's place in history are a stop on a walking tour in the cemetery. Recent efforts by historians to commemorate Jonestown and its residents, like Brooks, reflect the desire of the local community to uncover and restore this vital piece of Orlando's historical consciousness. These initiatives challenge the fulfillment of the "City Beautiful" motto by helping Orlando recognize its painful past. The next time you find yourself in Greenwood Cemetery, stop by Osborne Brooks's grave, say his name, and remember Jonestown. ■



Top left: Osborne Brooks's military draft card. His address of 1424 E. South St. is now the site of the 408 exit ramp. Top right: Osborne Brooks's military headstone application. Bottom left: The marker in Greenwood Cemetery for section K, which was originally segregated. Bottom right: The Brooks family circa 1920s. A young Osborne is seen standing next to his father, Bert, with his mother, Sophronia, standing behind.

ORLANDO'S SUBURBAN SHIFT

Colonial Plaza and the Evolution of the City's Retail Landscape

By Rachel Williams

"The one-stop shopping center of tomorrow that's here today" – that was the tagline in the *Orlando Sentinel* when Colonial Plaza officially opened on Jan. 31, 1956. What might seem like an ordinary shopping center to 21st-century residents was once considered a groundbreaking development. At its inception in the mid-20th century, Colonial Plaza was the largest retail development in Florida, marking a significant milestone in the state's retail history.

Orlando residents in the 1950s, accustomed to shopping in the downtown district, suddenly had access to a more convenient suburban shopping experience. With 2,000 parking spaces and a variety of stores, Colonial Plaza reflected the city's rapid postwar growth and the broader trends of suburban sprawl and consumer culture in mid-century America. Over the decades, Colonial Plaza adapted to changing retail landscapes, from a thriving strip mall to a hybrid power center, mirroring the evolution of shopping centers and suburban life in the United States.

Shoppers in 1968 enjoying the indoor, air-conditioned expansion of Colonial Plaza.

Aerial view of Colonial Plaza in the late 1950s with a full parking lot.

Shopping Centers in Historical Context

The idea of centralized shopping centers is as old as commerce itself. Ancient marketplaces such as the Roman forum and Near Eastern bazaars provided spaces for vendors to sell goods, ranging from spices to textiles. By the late 18th and 19th centuries, Europe saw the rise of enclosed shopping arcades, which catered primarily to affluent customers. These arcades featured luxury goods under a single roof, establishing a precedent for the modern shopping mall.

In the United States, early 20th-century shopping revolved around downtown districts. Main Street shopping areas offered essential goods and services, including pharmacies, grocery stores, and clothing retailers. Shoppers navigated busy streets, often on foot, to patronize various stores over multiple blocks. Orlando's downtown shopping district, centered on Orange Avenue in the 20th century, reflected this trend. In 1914, the Yowell-Duckworth Co. opened Orlando's first department store (later, Ivey's) at 1 S. Orange Ave., followed two weeks later by Dickson-Ives across the street. Both buildings made the intersection of Orange Avenue and Central Boulevard a focal point of retail activity for decades.

Suburban Sprawl and the Rise of Colonial Plaza

Orlando experienced explosive growth in the 1920s, fueled by economic prosperity and a housing boom. The city's population swelled from 9,000 in 1920 to over 27,000 in 1930. Although the Great Depression briefly halted this expansion, the post-World War II era ushered in renewed growth. New industries, including the Martin Company and Tupperware, brought jobs to the region, while the expansion of highways facilitated suburban development. As Orlando residents moved to newly built suburbs, traffic and limited parking made downtown shopping increasingly inconvenient.

In response to the need for a suburban shopping hub, construction of Colonial Plaza began in 1954 on land once part of the T.G. Lee dairy farm. Developer Michael R. Sudakow envisioned a shopping center that would accommodate Orlando's future growth.

Lowell Fyvolent, Sudakow's representative, predicted that Colonial Plaza would become a central gathering place for the expanding Orlando-Winter Park area. Conveniently located on Colonial Drive between Bumby Avenue and Primrose Drive, the shopping center was designed to provide ample parking and easy access via major thoroughfares.

View from the Colonial Plaza parking lot in the 1960s after the expansion and addition of Jordan Marsh.

Colonial Plaza's Grand Opening

Colonial Plaza officially opened on Jan. 31, 1956, to overwhelming enthusiasm. Its 2,000-space parking lot proved inadequate for the estimated 150,000 visitors on the opening day, leading to traffic jams along Colonial Drive that stretched for miles. Overflowing parking lots forced visitors to seek out spots in nearby vacant lots and walk to the plaza. Police directed traffic and assisted pedestrians throughout the day.

Colonial Plaza initially housed around 25 stores, including two grocery chains (Publix and A&P), two variety stores (W.T. Grant and McCrory), and a Walgreens pharmacy that relocated from downtown. In March 1956, Belk opened Orlando's largest department store at Colonial Plaza, complete with the city's first escalator. Other notable additions included Ronnie's Restaurant, which would become a local favorite and a cultural touchstone.

Expansion and the Mall Era

Colonial Plaza underwent its first major expansion in 1961, transforming into a partially enclosed, air-conditioned mall with 30 new stores. The centerpiece of this development was a four-story Jordan Marsh department store, featuring escalators staffed by Eastern Air Lines flight attendants during the store's debut.

By its 1962 reopening, Colonial Plaza had become Florida's only air-conditioned enclosed mall and the largest shopping center south of Atlanta. The expansion also included a massive parking lot extension, increasing capacity to 15,000 spaces.

In 1973, Colonial Plaza expanded again, adding a larger Belk department store and additional retail space. However, the era of the mall was in full swing, and competition emerged with the opening of the Fashion Square Mall less than a mile away. Built around an existing Sears store, Fashion Square offered a more modern shopping experience. By the 1970s, Orlando was home to six shopping malls, a number that doubled by the 1990s.

Above: Intersection of East Colonial Drive and Bumby Avenue in the 1960s.

Decline and Redevelopment

As the popularity of enclosed malls grew, Colonial Plaza struggled to maintain its relevance. By the early 1990s, its hybrid design of a strip mall combined with an enclosed section felt outdated. By 1994, the plaza had a 50 percent vacancy rate. In 1995, Cousins/Newmarket purchased the property and began redeveloping it into a "power center." Most of the original buildings were demolished, replaced with standalone big-box retailers and redesigned parking areas.

Today, only a few remnants of the original Colonial Plaza remain. The buildings housing Petco and Barnes & Noble are echoes of the plaza's mid-century heyday, with Marshall's in the place of the 1973 Belk store. In 2022, reports surfaced suggesting the current owner, Kimco Realty Corporation, might redevelop portions of the shopping center into mixed-use residential spaces, though no timeline has been established.

The Legacy of Colonial Plaza

Colonial Plaza's story is emblematic of mid-century suburbanization and the evolution of American retail. Once a pioneering shopping destination, it showcased the shift from downtown districts to suburban centers designed for automobile convenience. Its rise and transformation reflect broader economic, cultural, and urban development trends that shaped Orlando and countless other cities across the United States.

While Colonial Plaza today may lack the grandeur it once held, its legacy as Florida's first major shopping center remains a significant chapter in the history of Orlando's growth and consumer culture. ■

Below: Colonial Plaza in the 1960s, showing Jordan Marsh and the massive parking lot expansion. The Plaza Theater (now The Plaza Live) is at the back right side of the lot. Right: East Colonial Drive at Bumby Avenue in 1979, where a sign advertises films at the Plaza Theater, often called the Rocking Chair Theater and then showing *Battlestar Galactica* and *The Exorcist*.

THE HISTORY AND TRANSFORMATION OF **BALDWIN PARK** IN ORLANDO

BY BRENDAN BUNTING O'CONNOR

Above: A 1941 aerial view of buildings at the U.S. Army Air Base in Orlando, now the site of Baldwin Park. Below: Members of the 17th Tactical Training Squadron in 1956 at the Air Force Base. The squadron trained crews on the Matador missile and was deployed to Taiwan in 1957.

Baldwin Park, located just minutes from downtown Orlando, is a vibrant and picturesque community that combines modern living with a deep sense of history, and just a dash of Stepford-like planned-community plastic falseness. One of the things that makes Baldwin Park truly unique is its transformation from a former military installation into a thriving urban neighborhood that city-planning students study in their textbooks.

WORLD WAR II BEGINNINGS

The story of Baldwin Park begins with the establishment during World War II of the Orlando Army Air Base, a site that has undergone several transformations over the decades. In 1928 it began as a civilian airfield that soon attracted the attention of U.S. Army Air Corps because of its potential for military applications. With the looming threat of global conflict, the federal government began investing in infrastructure to bolster its air capabilities, and Orlando Municipal Airport was identified as a strategic location for future operations.

In 1940, as tensions in Europe escalated and the United States prepared for potential involvement in World War II, the Army Air Corps formally took control of the Orlando airport. New runways, hangars, and barracks were constructed, transforming the once modest facility into a bustling military installation and Orlando into a bit of a garrison town.

During World War II, Orlando Army Air Base became a critical training hub. It hosted the Army Air Forces School of Applied Tactics, where pilots and aircrews trained in advanced combat techniques. Thousands of troops were stationed at the Orlando base, which by 1942 had grown to 1,000 acres with six runways. It occupied not only the airfield site south of State Road 50 (now Orlando Executive Airport) but also stretched north across the highway to encompass what's now Baldwin Park.

Above: Rendering of Baldwin Park's Village Center from a 2003 development brochure. Below: The sign in front of the Orlando Municipal Airport in 1931. The airport originally opened in 1928 and was the first commercial airport in the region. In 1940, the U.S. Army Air Corps took over the airport for wartime training, and it remained a military training facility until 1946.

In 1942, the Orlando area's military presence further increased with the establishment of a second base, south of the city. Originally called Orlando Air Army Air Field No. 2, the base was renamed Pinecastle Army Air Field on Jan. 1, 1943.

After the war, the Municipal Airport property was returned to the City of Orlando, and the land that would become Audubon Park, Fashion Square Mall, and other properties was sold as the base gradually reduced its operations. In the 1960s, what remained of Orlando's first Air Force base was turned over to the Navy for use as the country's third Naval Training Center.

THE NAVY YEARS

Commissioned on July 1, 1968, the Naval Training Center Orlando became one of the U.S. Navy's premier facilities for training recruits and specialized personnel. At its peak, it spanned more than 2,000 acres and featured extensive facilities including classrooms, barracks, administrative buildings, and recreational areas. The base also played a significant role in the local economy, providing jobs and fostering a sense of community in Orlando. Over three decades, tens of thousands of sailors passed through its gates and called Orlando home.

The end of the Cold War brought significant changes to the U.S. military, including widespread base realignments and closures, and in 1993 the Naval Training Center Orlando was marked for closure. The decision marked the end of an era for Orlando, as the military had been a prominent fixture in the city for over half a century, going back to the Air Force days.

The closure process was completed in 1999, and the Navy began transferring the land back to the City of Orlando and to private developers. While the closure initially raised concerns about job losses and economic impact, it also presented an opportunity for urban redevelopment. City planners, developers, and community stakeholders began envisioning a new purpose for the land that would honor its history while meeting the needs of a growing population.

A NEW URBANIST VISION

The redevelopment of the former Naval Training Center site was one of the most ambitious urban projects in Orlando's history. Guided by the principles of New Urbanism, the city aimed to create a walkable, mixed-use community that integrated residential, commercial, and recreational spaces. Unlike most New Urbanist developments such as Celebration or Avalon Park, it wasn't located in a far-off field or suburb but just two miles from Orlando's City Hall.

Planning for Baldwin Park began in the late 1990s, with extensive input from urban planners, architects, and the local community. The design brief from City Hall emphasized sustainability, connectivity, and a sense of place.

Construction officially began in 2001, and by 2003, the first residents began moving into Baldwin Park. The transformation was remarkable: a once-sprawling military base was now a thriving neighborhood with tree-lined streets, parks, and vibrant public spaces. The bulk of the hardscape from the Naval Training Center was ground into gravel and used as a porous base for all the green spaces throughout the development, making them into essentially large French ditches, funneling stormwater runoff into the adjacent Lake Baldwin. Baldwin Park is built on the bones of its past.

Today, Baldwin Park is celebrated for its harmonious blend of urban convenience and natural beauty. The community's design encourages walkability, with wide sidewalks, bike lanes, and interconnected streets. At the neighborhood's heart is its Village Center, a bustling mixed-use hub of shops, restaurants, and offices. Residents and visitors can enjoy a variety of dining options, boutique stores, and services, all within a short

Above: A postcard shows the Post Chapel at Orlando Air Base. It was near the end of the runway, requiring that the steeple not be in roof's center due to height limitations. Below: Women U.S. Navy recruits in formation march next to the barracks at Naval Training Center Orlando in the 1970s.

walk from their homes. Baldwin Park even has drag bingo (I know, because I host it at the local brewery).

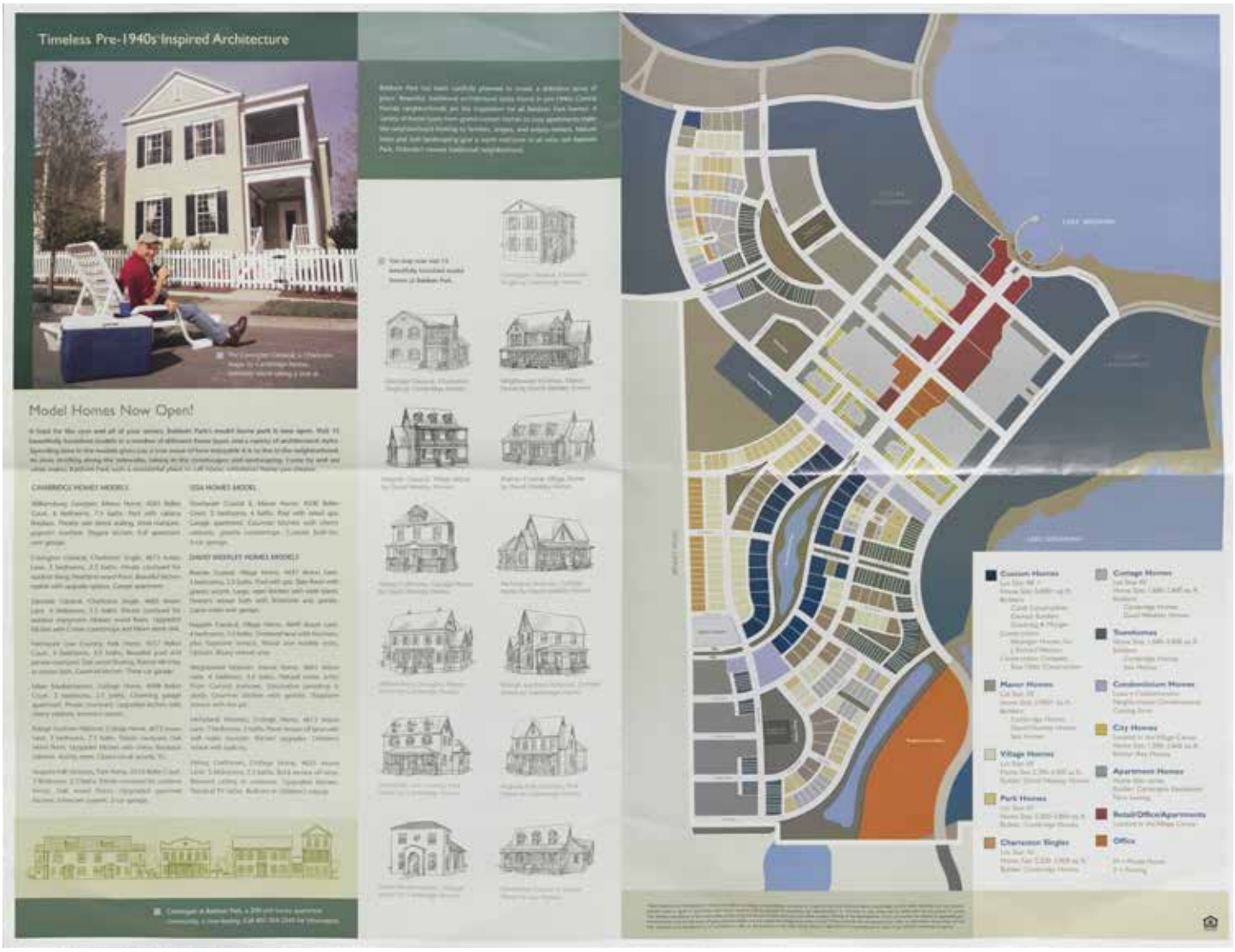
The neighborhood's parks and green spaces are another defining feature. Lake Baldwin Park, which includes a scenic trail and natural green buffer around the lake, is a favorite destination for outdoor enthusiasts. Residents can jog, bike, or simply relax while taking in the tranquil views. The park also includes a dog-friendly area, making it a popular spot for pet owners who live in Baldwin Park and also for those who drive in from surrounding neighborhoods.

Even with all of the shiny new additions, Baldwin Park's history as a Navy base has not been forgotten. The community's namesake is Robert Baldwin, undersecretary of the U.S. Navy in the 1960s, and its design incorporates elements that pay homage to its military heritage, with several streets and landmarks named after naval terms and figures.

The transformation of Baldwin Park is now cited as a model for urban redevelopment and infill projects. By prioritizing sustainability, community engagement, and thoughtful design, the project has demonstrated how former industrial or military sites can be successfully repurposed into vibrant neighborhoods. Baldwin Park's success has inspired similar projects across the country, showcasing the potential for adaptive reuse of land while still honoring its past. ■

Simonhardt93

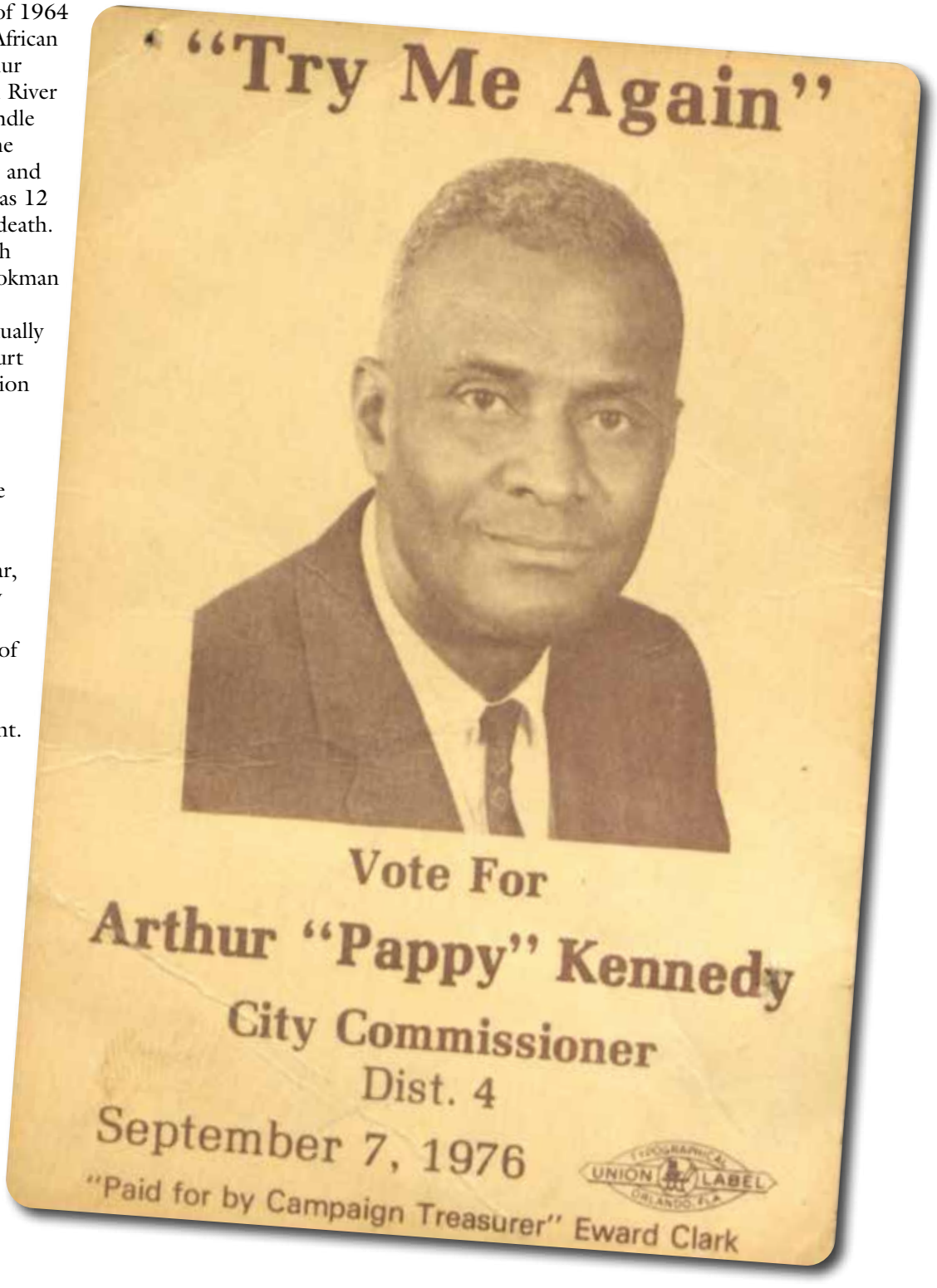
Above: A contemporary view of Baldwin Park's Village Center. Below: A 2003 development brochure for Baldwin Park, showcasing available model homes and a map for the planned community. The neighborhood highlighted living for all stages of life in a traditional architectural style.



It wasn't until nearly ten years after the Civil Rights Act of 1964 that Orlando saw its first African American elected official. Arthur "Pappy" Kennedy was born in River Junction in the Florida Panhandle in 1913. Orphaned at age 3, he was raised by his grandmother and moved to Orlando when he was 12 to live with relatives after her death. He graduated from Jones High School, attended Bethune-Cookman University, and as a teenager, worked as a bellhop and eventually bell captain at the Orange Court Hotel, then a popular destination for winter visitors.

Kennedy tried enlisting in World War II but was turned down from service. Instead, he took a job as a civilian worker at the Army Signal Corps in Mobile, Alabama. After the war, he returned to Orlando – now with a family – and organized the Orlando Negro Chamber of Congress in the kitchen of his Griffin Park home, becoming the organization's first president.

In 1967, Kennedy ran for city commissioner in District 4 but ultimately lost to Bill Ankney by about 3,000 votes. Undeterred, he ran again in 1972 and, after a four-month legal battle over the validity of absentee ballots, was the elected winner (by 109 votes). He was sworn into office in 1973. Kennedy ran for a second term in 1976 and won again by an overwhelming margin, obtaining more votes than any other candidate in Orlando election history at the time. His slogan, "Try me again," on his political campaign card proved to be exactly what his voters did. ■



HISTORIC HAPPENINGS

MOSQUITO COUNTY 200TH ANNIVERSARY

On Dec. 29, 2024, Orange County commemorated the 200th anniversary of the creation of Mosquito County, which originally included areas that are now Volusia, Brevard, Indian River, St. Lucie, Marion, Martin, Seminole, Osceola, Orange, Lake, Polk, and Palm Beach counties.

FIELD DAY

In November, History Center staff participated in the Downtown Orlando Field Day, a fundraiser for City District Main Street, for the second year in a row. A day of community and camaraderie, during Field Day downtown businesses compete in four (usually silly) games on the Dr. Phillips Center lawn.

FESTIVAL OF TREES

The History Center participated in Festival of Trees presented by Council of 101 to raise funds for the Orlando Museum of Art's educational programs. Our tree paid homage to Florida's cowboy history and was designed and executed by Griffon Binkowski, a member of the History Center's education staff.

PUNK ROCK MUSEUM

Courtesy Jim Leatherman

On Jan. 18, 2025, Punk Rock Museum core member Vinnie Fiorello, also a founding member of the Florida ska-punk band, Less Than Jake, talked about his experiences as a musician and his views about how underground music can coexist with the often more straight-laced museum culture.

HISPANIC HERITAGE MONTH

We celebrated Hispanic Heritage Month with our Fourth Annual Celebration of Latin American Arts & Culture on Sept. 14, 2024. Featured were Central Florida performers and visual artists from several Latin American countries.

CURATOR CONVERSATION – HOTELS

On Thursday, Aug. 15, 2024, author Rick Kilby surveyed Victorian-era resorts at Florida's springs where America's elite ventured to "take the waters" – a Third Thursday program as part of the *Home Away from Home* pocket exhibit.

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Civil War amputation saw
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ORLANDO Collected

ON DISPLAY
APRIL 12, 2025 – JAN. 11, 2026

Saw it at the museum.

Curated from the collection of the Historical Society of Central Florida, in collaboration with individuals and organizations throughout the community, *Orlando Collected* marks the city's 150th anniversary with the exhibition of 150 of some of the most fascinating and rarely seen items from Orlando's history.