



The Historical Society of Orange Park

April 2021 Newsletter

Spring is upon us and the pandemic situation continues to improve. Community events, particularly outdoor events, are becoming more numerous, the Clay County Fair is in full swing and life is returning to normal, maybe not as fast we would all like, but it's getting there. For that, we are grateful.

The Town of Orange Park is in the process of constructing a new playground at Clarke Park. As most of you know, the playground is a big attraction to local families and its completion is eagerly anticipated. To allow construction to proceed as quickly as possible, the park will be temporarily closed. Therefore, there will be no Clarke House tours this month. Tours will resume next month.

With spring comes Easter. This year Easter will be April 4th. We wish everyone a very Happy Easter!

"Easter is a time to rejoice, be thankful, be assured that all is forgiven, so life extends beyond the soil of the earth." – Byron Pulsifer

Happy Easter!



Local News

The Longest Table

On Saturday, April 24 from 6 PM to 8 PM, the Town of Orange Park will host The Longest Table. This event is open to all and its purpose is to build community by building and strengthening ties between residents. In our modern world, many activities have moved online to the virtual realm. Take a step back, log out and slow down. Come join your neighbors and share a meal at the east end of Kingsley Avenue on April 24. You never know who you might meet or what you will discover.



Please visit [The Longest Table • Town of Orange Park](#) or the Town of Orange Park's website, [Town of Orange Park](#), for more information.

Election Day

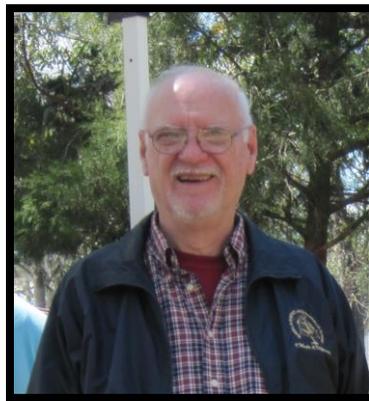
Election Day is Tuesday, April 13. Polls will be open from 7 AM to 7 PM. The only polling location in Orange Park is Town Hall. Two Town Council seats are on the ballot as well as a referendum to abolish the Magnolia Cemetery Board of Trustees.

Information on the candidates for each seat can be found by visiting [Town Elections • Town of Orange Park](#). Information on the referendum can be found by visiting the Town's website at [Town of Orange Park](#).

Walter Clarke

We are sad to report the passing of Walter Clarke, son of William and Georgia Clarke, Jr. and grandson of William and Carrie Clarke, Sr. Walter no longer lived in Orange Park but often visited each year on Carrie Clarke Day. He was always happy to share stories of his time in Orange Park

and loved to see everyone enjoying the grounds at Clarke Park. Walter never met a stranger. We will miss his joyful presence.



Continuing News Items

Orange Park Memories

We are very interested in collecting your Orange Park Memories. If you would like to share your recollections of life in Orange Park, we would be happy to hear from you. Orange Park is constantly changing. Remnants of our history are scattered throughout the community. The stories and recollections you provide don't have to be from the distant past. History is created every day! Your contributions can be brief as well. Tell us how you have accommodated the restrictions imposed by the pandemic, a school memory, your first job or your first home here in town. Your stories and photographs provide a record of where we have been and keep us connected through our shared experience. Please contact us at info@ophistory.org to share your stories.

Paul Lawrence Dunbar High: A History of Separate and Unequal Education

Mr. Eugene Francis has compiled a history of the historic African American school in Green Cove Springs. The collection is called *Paul Lawrence Dunbar High: A History of Separate and Unequal Education*. Working in conjunction with the Augusta Savage Arts and Cultural Center, Mr. Francis hopes this will be an on-going collection and is actively seeking contributions of photographs, documents and artifacts.

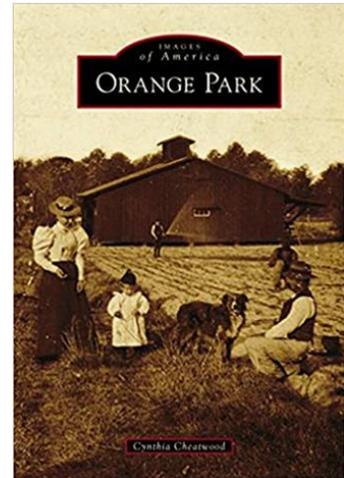
If you would like to contribute to this collection, please contact the county archive specialist, Vishi Garig, (904) 371-0027 (clayarchives@clayclerk.com).

Images of America - Orange Park

Would you like to learn more about the history of Orange Park? If so, you should pick up a copy of Images of America – Orange Park. This book, written by Society President, Cynthia Cheatwood, shares the history of our town through archival photographs and stories collected from a variety of sources.

The Historical Society of Orange Park has a limited number of copies for sale. Copies can be purchased through the Society for \$20 each (\$15 each for Society members). *This book is also available on Amazon, Barnes and Noble or various other outlets online.*

For more information, please email us at info@ophistry.org. All author royalties for the sale of this book will go toward historical preservation in Orange Park.



Green House Update

Funds are still being collected for this project. If you would like to help us save this piece of Florida history, please send a tax-deductible donation to the Historical Society of Orange Park, P. O. Box 08, Orange Park, FL 32073. Thanks!



Clarke House Tours



While the Clarke House is typically open for tours on the second Sunday of each month, there will be no tours in April due to the construction of a new playground in Clarke Park. We anticipate that tours will resume in May. Please check our May newsletter for information on our next open house.

Orange Park Memory

By Howard Olsen

In 1956 my parents bought their first new car, a yellow and black, two-tone Buick Special. One day my mom and my aunt decided to go out to Orange Park to a large tomato field that they heard about and pick some free tomatoes. The commercial harvest was over, so we were allowed to have whatever was left on the tomato vines.

We loaded up the Buick with my aunt, my mom and my sister and my five cousins and we drove out to a farm, near where Grove Park subdivision is today, which had large tomato fields on both sides of the road. We started picking tomatoes. For about an hour or so, all of us kids and my mom and my aunt, were busy filling up our bushel basket.

Eventually me and my two younger male cousins decided that the half rotten tomatoes on the vine would make good missiles and we started tossing them at each other. This quickly erupted into a full-scale tomato fight.

Soon it was time to go home but my mom would not let us get into the new car because we were all covered with tomatoes. So, we were escorted to large water tank on the side of the road and using a hose connected to it got rinsed off before we got back in the car. Needless to say, my mom was not in a good mood. But we had some fun and a bushel of tomatoes.

Washington Benedict's River Boulevard

By Cindy Cheatwood

If you ask folks in Orange Park what part of town is the biggest draw, the must-see for visitors, the answer is most likely going to be River Road. With its majestic view of the St. John's River, its charming moss-covered oaks and historic homes, the street has a personality all its own. Hundreds of people stroll along its riverfront enjoying healthy exercise in the gentle breezes and warm sunshine. It has been a gathering spot for charity walks, marathons, Fourth of July celebrations, and countless dog walks over its one hundred forty plus year existence. The street is a key feature of the identity of Orange Park.

When Washington Gano Benedict developed Orange Park, he named its few streets for a variety of reasons. River Road was originally called River Boulevard and its descriptions featured heavily in early promotional materials issued by Benedict's Florida Winter Home and Improvement Company. A savvy promoter, Benedict developed a large riverfront tourist hotel, on what is today, Moosehaven property. The road, established between the hotel and the river, provided a sort of buffer in times of tropical storms and rising tides. It would have provided an avenue of access to the hotel for wagons, carriages, and horses and would have offered a place for a leisurely stroll along the river for hotel guests. Postcards that have survived through the decades describe the charm of these strolls.



River Boulevard - 1880's

The Florida Winter Home and Improvement Company set out River Boulevard to start at the northern city limits, wind along the point, along the edge of Doctor's Lake and wind up at the western town limit at Talula Springs (today's Springs neighborhood). The boulevard therefore formed sort of outline of the entire eastern and southern extents of the town limits. The main street to intersect the Boulevard was named Kingsley Avenue, an homage to the previous owner of the plantation on which the road lies. Eight residential blocks were laid out between the large tourist Parkview Hotel property and the northern boundary of the town. They stretched from the river west to Plainfield Ave. (there was no Park Avenue then). These were named for representatives of the Benedict's Company and early landowners.



Alpheus Blake

Streets off the Boulevard with names like Blake, Eldridge, and Loring were named for directors of the Company. Alpheus Perley Blake was a Massachusetts land developer friend of Benedict, who served as second in command for the Company. He also developed at least one other place in Florida including the town of Blake, Florida, named for him until 1930, when the name changed to South Daytona.

David Loring was the Company's Secretary and Treasurer.

Bostonian, John F. Eldridge was an investor and early resident who also served as mayor and town clerk. Mr. Eldridge had a sugar refinery business in Orange Park, which a 1900 newspaper reported as having 100

acres of sugar cane planted. Mr. Eldridge also worked with the Hotel Marion (formerly Parkview Hotel).

Stiles Avenue is named for Benjamin F. Stiles who started coming to Florida for health reasons in 1868. He settled, after retiring, in Orange Park where, in 1872, he bought sixty acres and grew 2300 orange trees, the largest grove in the area. He served as justice of the peace and mayor.

Campbell Street was named for O. E. Campbell, who was the first president of the town council of Orange Park. He served as ice-president of the Orange Park Fruit and Vegetable Growers Association (Edward D. Sabin was president).

Other streets were set up off River Boulevard, but they have been erased from the map. Such names include Holt Ave (named for E.N. Holt who bought and refurbished the Parkview and named it for his wife, Marion), Copeland Ave. (named for Judge Copeland who came here after serving as a general in the Union army), May Ave. (named for Judge Alpha C. May, a citrus farmer who lost all his trees in the 1890s freeze) and Johnson Ave. (perhaps named for B. J. Johnson, who served as a director of the Florida Winter Home and Improvement Company in addition to being founder of the Palmolive Soap Company). These are now remembered only on the old maps commissioned by the Florida Winter Home and Improvement Company.



Benjamin Stiles' Home

Washington Gano Benedict saw the magnetism of the river. In addition to the fine hotel, he created and the streets he laid out, he created a sign which, at one time was the largest in the world. The 200-foot-long sign faced the river. It marked the northern town limits, spelling out "ORANGE PARK" in letters fifteen feet tall and twelve feet wide so they could be read easily by tourists passing by on the river in steamboats.

In 1880, Benedict laid out a long table loaded with food in honor of Ulysses S. Grant's visit to Orange Park. The event was covered by Harpers Weekly magazine. In February 2020, the Town renewed this event by hosting a longest table dinner for the public. In what we hope will become an annual tradition, the Town will host another longest table event on April 24.

Founder Benedict did not use his name on any of the streets he named. He did use his grandmother's name, Gano on one interior street. There was also a town called Benedict, FL,

near Ocala that officially appears when a Post Office was established on November 18, 1884 but that name was changed by 1897.

In 1922, Moosehaven was established on the grounds of the old Hotel Marion. It is now a fixture and integral part of the River Road story. Over the years the Moose have sponsored celebrations, pancake breakfasts, Halloween extravaganzas, July 4th events, chili cookoffs, car shows and much more on its River Road grounds.

River Boulevard has changed over the years. It was widened and then paved, several times now. Sidewalks were added. It was ravaged by storms; Hurricane Dora took a heavy toll in 1964. At the site of the old steamboat dock pavilion, where River Road becomes Kingsley Ave there is now a passive park called Kingsley East,

In 1997, River Road resident, Mary Ann Study worked tirelessly with the Womans Club to create a River Road Historic District. In next month's newsletter you will be able to read about that. For now, as spring wakens and the cursed pandemic releases his choke hold, forget your cares. Take a stroll along the Boulevard. Listen to the whispered conversations of generations who came before. Treasure the place that helps define our town, have a moment with history.

Look For Us on Facebook

Look for the Historical Society of Orange Park the next time you visit Facebook. Check our page for updates on society activities and updates on the Veterans Memorial. Don't forget to click "Like" on our page.

Membership in the Historical Society of Orange Park

We are grateful for the support our members have provided over the years through membership and participation. We ask that you continue to support our mission to preserve the history of Orange Park and share that history with the community. Ask a friend to join us as well. You can visit our website, www.ophistory.org, to download a membership form there.

