



# The Historical Society of Orange Park

## June 2021 Newsletter

June is here, school will soon be out, which means the start of vacation season. This year, travel is back! We hope that everyone is out of the house and back on the move. As we all make plan to go places and do things, please remember there are some people, particularly our senior citizens, that are struggling to shake off the lethargy of isolation and social distancing. Please encourage them to make the effort to get outside and back in the flow of life.

The construction of a new playground ran into unforeseen delays. As a result, Clarke Park remains closed. We will not be hosting our Clarke House tours again this month.

Also of note, the Town of Orange Park Historic Home Workshop scheduled for June 19 and 20 at the Clarke House had to be postponed. No new date has been announced. We will share information on this event when a new date is set.

### Local News

#### Kids Fest

The Town of Orange Park's Kids Fest returns to Town Hall Park on Saturday, June 12 and Sunday, June 13. This is an outdoor event with all sorts of fun activities for kids who are always looking for something to do. There will be many free activities, a few premium events that will charge a nominal fee and plenty of entertainment. The Historical Society will be hosting a booth at this event. Volunteers are needed if you can spare a couple of hours to staff the booth. Admission is free and free parking is available at Moosehaven with shuttle transportation provided to and from Town Hall Park. Please check the Town of Orange Park's website, <https://opkidsfest.com/> for more information.

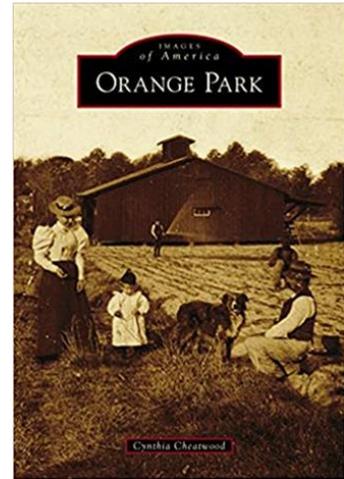
#### Orange Park Memories – Hurricane Dora

Where were you during Hurricane Dora? While this area has been impacted by a numerous hurricanes and tropical storms in years past, we have not taken a direct hit by a hurricane since September 1964 when Dora came ashore near St. Augustine. Fortunately, Dora was not a major hurricane, but it did leave behind its share of damage, flooding and power outages. If you were in the Orange Park area in 1964, we'd love to hear your story. Please send us your, or your family's, memories of how you were impacted by the storm. We'll share your recollections later

this year's in the September issue of this newsletter. Your recollections can be submitted via email to [info@ophistory.org](mailto:info@ophistory.org) or by mail to PO Box 8, Orange Park, FL 32067.

### **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 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@ophistory.org](mailto:info@ophistory.org). All author royalties for the sale of this book will go toward historical preservation in Orange Park.

### **Clarke House Cleanup**

On Saturday, May 29, members of the National Junior Honor Society at Orange Park Junior High School joined us at the Clarke House for a spring cleaning. The student volunteers cleaned the house upstairs and down. Floors were vacuumed, furniture was cleaned, and the screened porch was swept out. We are grateful to these students for giving a few hours of their Saturday to spruce up the Clarke House.



### **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 June due to the construction of a new playground in Clarke Park. We anticipate that tours will resume in July. Please check our July newsletter for information on our next open house.

### **Mrs. Stowe's Visit to Laurel Grove**

By Van Hogan

In the spring of 1867, Harriett Beecher Stowe, noted abolitionist and author of "Uncle Tom's Cabin" came to Florida. The purpose of her visit was a trip to Laurel Grove Plantation, the site of the future town of Orange Park. Mrs. Stowe wrote about her visit and provided a vivid description of the old plantation in a time of transition.

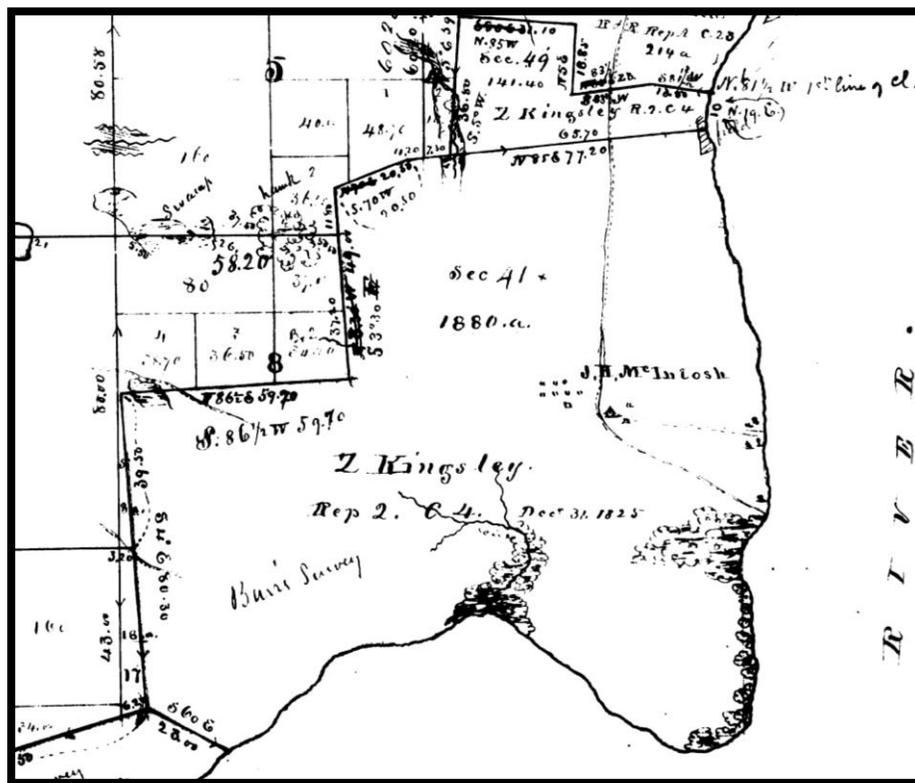
During the Civil War, Mrs. Stowe's brother, James Beecher, a Union soldier, had been stationed in Northeast Florida. He liked the area and shared those sentiments with his family.

After the war, Harriett and Calvin Stowe's son, Frederick, who had served in the Army, needed an occupation. Remembering his uncle's description, he thought he might try his hand at raising cotton in North Florida.

Soon after the end of the war, Frederick and several partners leased Laurel Grove Plantation with the intent to grow cotton on the property and split the profits with the owner. Frederick had been wounded at Gettysburg and his recovery, particularly his psychological recovery, had been slow. Mrs. Stowe, interested in her son's recovery, invested \$10,000 in the venture. In 1867, Mrs. Stowe decided it was time to visit and follow up on her investment.

Mrs. Stowe, along with several other visitors, arrived in the late winter or early spring by boat. She brought with her furnishings, dishes and clothes to make her stay more enjoyable. The sailboat on which she traveled did not make it to shore until late in the afternoon. The plantation's pier was in poor condition, so the boat was pulled onto the shore to offload. Her party was met by Frederick and his partners. Upon disembarking, everyone walked approximately a half mile to the plantation house.

While we are not exactly sure where the plantation house was located. An 1849 drawing of the area shows a road leading from the river along the general path of what is now Kingsley Avenue. That road then turned north and continued approximately along the path of what is now Plainfield Avenue. The survey also shows the general location of the house and outbuildings. The survey compares favorably with Mrs. Stowe's description.



Mrs. Stowe described the house as a one and a half-story cottage with a 12' wide porch across the front. It sat 3' above the ground on live oak piers to allow for air circulation. A wide hallway ran through the center of the house with rooms on either side. It was in poor condition having been mostly abandoned during the war, occupied mostly by transients seeking shelter. Many windows were broken, a door had a broken hinge, and the house was full of rubbish.

Several outbuildings also occupied the property. Adjacent to the house was a one-story, octagonal building that had served as a music room. Close by was another building with four

rooms that had served as a schoolroom including quarters for a live-in teacher. Also near the home was a large barn and a gin house for cotton grown on the plantation.

A kitchen and a large brick oven were constructed apart from the house. Other structures included a covered well, a smoke house and a well-insulated milk house.

Also nearby were the workers' quarters. These homes, described as well-built, comfortable little houses, originally housed the slaves that worked the plantation prior to the Civil War. The workers at the site consisted of approximately 30 families. These workers were former slaves that had come from various places across the southeast. They had the knowledge needed to grow cotton and used their newfound freedom to travel to find suitable employment and a place to live. They found that at Laurel Grove.



Each morning, the foreman would call the workers together by blowing a shell. All the workers would gather, be divided into crews and assigned their daily tasks. While they continued to perform the same work they had always known they now had new opportunities. They knew education was the key to a better life. Many were desperate to learn to read and write. Mrs. Stowe and the other residents of Laurel Grove provided assistance in the form of books and instruction.

Mrs. Stowe described a nearby neighbor, Mr. Johns. Mr. Johns was probably typical of rural, Clay County residents that lived in outlying areas. Mr. Johns and his wife were self-sufficient. They kept livestock and raised their own food. He and his wife were very hospitable to neighbors and friends. They expected and received hospitality in return. Mr. Johns did not have much use for the government. He had been drafted to serve in the Civil War but, after a brief stint in camp, decided he did not want to participate and went home. Armed squads were sent to capture him and return him to camp on two different occasions, but both were unable to do so and went home empty-handed. After that, he was left alone.

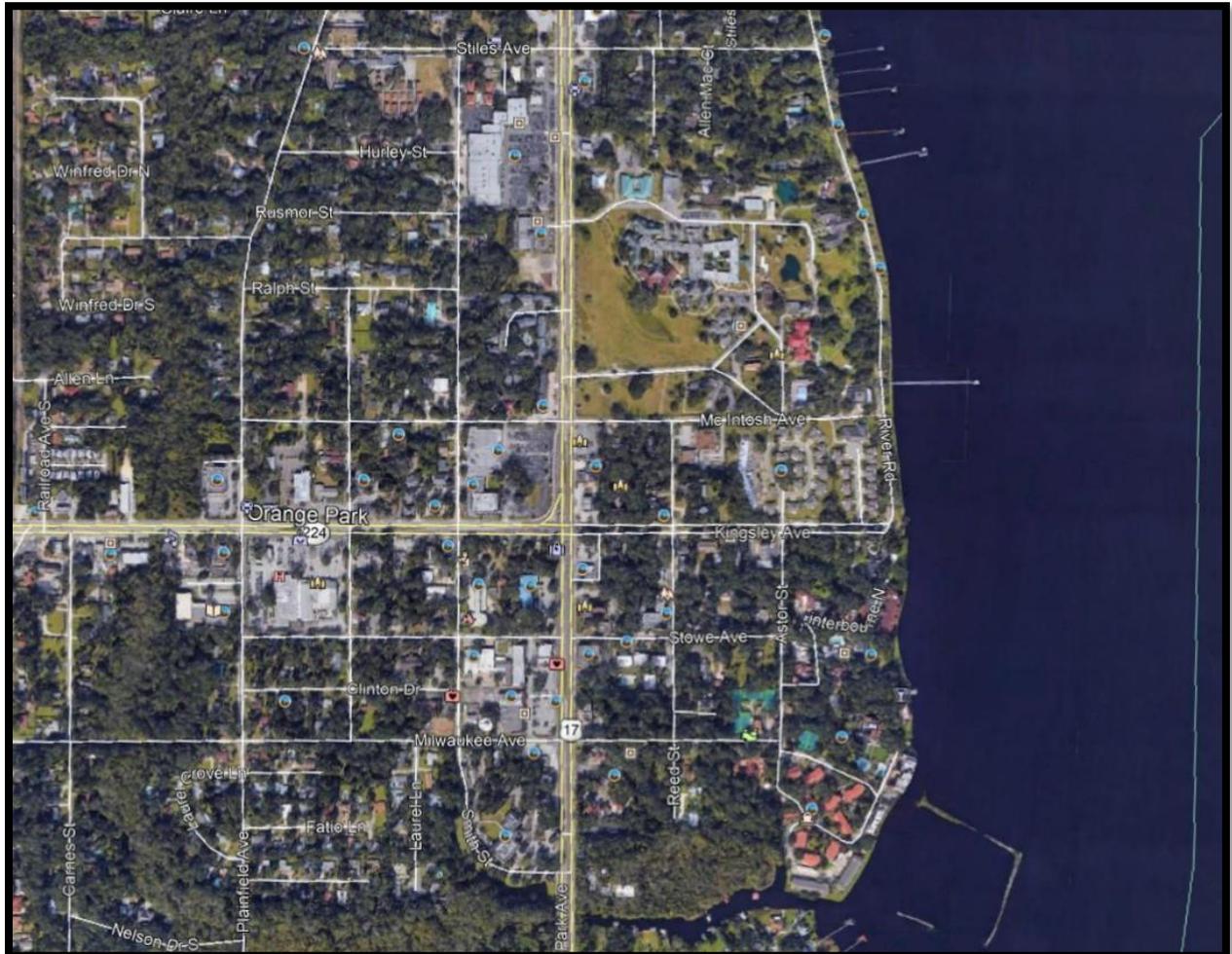
Mrs. Stowe enjoyed her time at Laurel Grove. She described keeping herself occupied by exploring the property, picnicking, sketching and accompanying the men on hunting trips.

Unfortunately, the effort to raise cotton at Laurel Grove was short-lived. Worms devoured the cotton crop along with Mrs. Stowe's \$10,000 investment. The land reverted to the owner, the partnership was dissolved, and each partner went on to other employment. However, Mrs. Stowe's story in the area was not over. During her stay at Laurel Grove, she had accompanied Frederick across the river to Mandarin to pick up their mail. She liked what she saw. She purchased a 30-acre orange grove in Mandarin and built a home along the St. Johns River. She

and her husband, Calvin, spent their winters in Mandarin until 1884, when Calvin's death and Mrs. Stowe's health made further trips to Florida impractical.

Mrs. Stowe is still remembered in Orange Park. Washington Gano Benedict, the founder of Orange Park, named a street for her when he developed the town a decade after her first visit. Mr. Benedict, anxious to sell property in his new town, was happy to take advantage of

Mrs. Stowe's celebrity and connection to the area. Stowe Avenue runs east to west between Astor Street and Plainfield Avenue just south of Kingsley Avenue.



Sources:

- “Our Florida Plantation” by Harriett Beecher Stowe, Atlantic Monthly, May 1879. Many thanks to Susan Ford and Sandy Arpen of the Mandarin Museum and Historical Society for providing a copy of this article.
- “Palmetto Leaves” by Harriett Beecher Stowe, 1873.

### **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](http://www.ophistory.org), to download a membership form there.

