REFLECTIONS FROM CENTRAL FLORIDA

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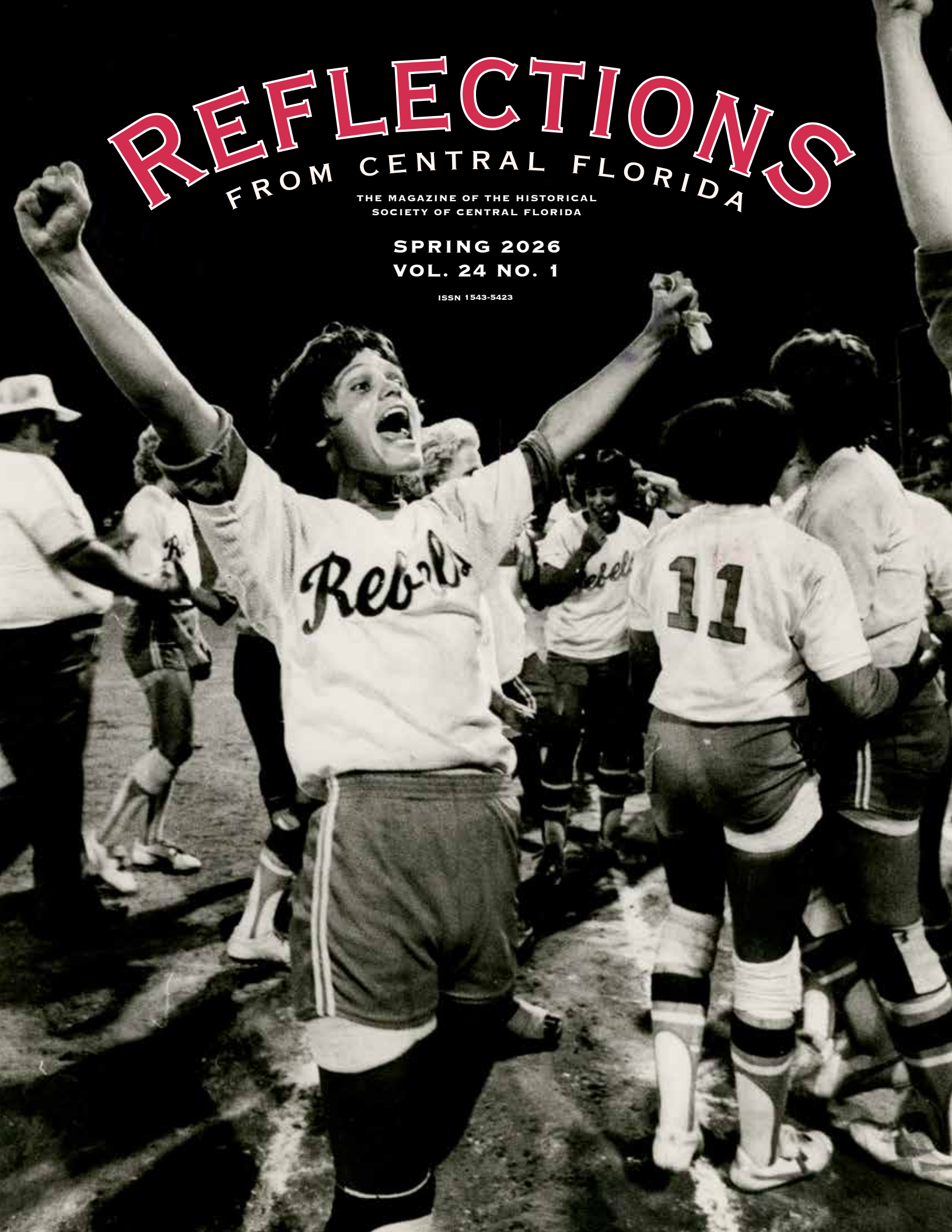

HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF CENTRAL FLORIDA

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.

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

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

BUILDING MOMENTUM: STORIES THAT CONNECT AND INSPIRE

The Orange County Regional History Center is building momentum in 2026 to share our stories on a larger scale and deepen the relationships that make history relevant in our daily lives. This year is a chance to not only recognize historic moments but also reflect on how the experiences of our region inform a rapidly changing American narrative.

Over the next few months, our exhibits and programs are poised to raise awareness of the people, places, and movements that make Central Florida unique and resilient. Through community voices and lived experience, we look forward to engaging in dialogue that helps bridge generations and perspectives and reminds us that history is both individual and collective. As our nation approaches its 250th anniversary, we remain focused on civic storytelling, youth empowerment, and community dialogue that engage residents.

These programs encourage us to consider the meanings of freedom, participation, and responsibility in our own lives. The History Center works with students from early learning to college age. Through immersive school trips and educator resources, as well as family programs and hands-on workshops, we aim to provide opportunities for discovery that foster curiosity and analytical and critical thinking. We do this in partnership with local artists, historians, museum professionals, and other community collaborators. We hope our work reflects the range of voices that makes Central Florida a beautiful place to live and grow.

So much of this is made possible by you. We rely on membership, philanthropy, and volunteers to manage the region's collections, broaden access to educational programming, and offer free and low-cost opportunities to the communities we serve. Each contribution strengthens our capacity to preserve the past and make it accessible and relevant for all who engage with it today. As you read through the pages of *Reflections*, we hope that the contents of this issue will encourage you to get involved, become a member, attend a program, explore our collection, or share your story. Through collective action, Central Florida's history will continue to serve as a living resource that helps shape and connect us all. ■

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

ABOUT THE COVER

Orlando Rebels infielder Patty Pyle celebrates the team's victory against the Raybestos Brakettes of Stratford, Connecticut, as the Rebels win the 1981 ASA Women's Major Fast Pitch National Championship in Houston, Texas. As a result of the win, the Orlando Rebels qualified for the 1982 ISF Women's World Championship in Taiwan, where they placed fourth out of 22 international teams.

CONTRIBUTORS

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Keauna Brantley served as the Orange County Regional History Center's 2025 Women's HERstory intern. She has a bachelor's degree in African American History and Political Science from Howard University. Since graduation, she has focused on researching Black laborers in Central Florida.

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Katie Kelley

Katie Kelley is the curator of exhibitions at the Orange County Regional History Center. She holds a master's degree in public history from the University of Central Florida, with a research focus in Florida history. Her career in museums spans nearly two decades and includes experience at historic sites and art, science, and history museums.

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IN THIS ISSUE

Reflections From Central Florida
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Reflections from Central Florida
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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.

HISTORIC HAPPENINGS

PRIDE CHAMBER

The Pride Chamber of Orlando held their Quarterly Membership Breakfast & New Member Orientation at the History Center in October 2025. After an informative presentation on the resources the organization offers, their members received an overview of the museum.

CELEBRATING 25 YEARS DOWNTOWN

Mayor Demings proclaimed Sept. 29, 2025, "Regional History Center 25th Anniversary Day," presenting the proclamation to Executive Director Azela Santana. Past directors Mike Perkins and Sara Van Arsdel (above, with Demings) joined staff for the occasion, as did Historical Society board members.

MAYOR DEMINGS AND SOCIETY BOARD

Orange County Mayor Jerry Demings visited with the Historical Society of Central Florida Board of Directors during their annual retreat. The Orange County Regional History Center is made possible through a unique partnership between the Board of County Commissioners and the Historical Society.

OC MAYOR'S VETERANS ADVISORY COUNCIL

In November 2025, the Orange County Mayor's Veterans Advisory Council held a ceremony in our military exhibition at which the Veteran of the Year Plaque was unveiled. The plaque, which honors local veterans, will be installed permanently at the History Center.

UF HUMANITIES VISIT

On Nov. 5, 2025, we hosted the University of Florida's "Beyond120" program for an afternoon of discussion, activities, and networking. Here the students participated in a mock trial based on the 1921 murder trial of Lena Clarke.

TRICK OR TREAT SAFE ZONE

In October 2025, nearly 2,000 trick-or-treaters visited the History Center for Trick or Treat Safe Zone. This popular annual event is a collaboration with the Orlando Public Library.

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.

A Decade Since Pulse

June 12, 2016. For those most affected by the Pulse nightclub shooting, the events of that date, now a full decade ago, have forever impacted their lives. It was then that a senseless and disgusting act of violence resulted in 49 deaths, many physical injuries, and an immeasurable amount of heartache for countless individuals and families.

In the days that followed, people from around the world expressed their sadness and frustration, while those who lived locally were experiencing the new version of Orlando's history firsthand, with this horrific episode now one of its most notable chapters. Some residents volunteered their time, donated money, or waited in line to give their own blood. All the while, survivors struggled in hospital rooms, and families and friends felt the absence of loved ones who never made it home.

The Central Florida community came together in mass at Lake Eola Park for a candlelight vigil on June 19, 2016, one week after the tragedy. It is estimated that as many as 50,000 people were in attendance, all compelled to join one another in solidarity. This image, captured by photographer Michael Maguire, shows mourners surrounding the lake's shore, their candles illuminating one of Orlando's most significant public gathering spaces.

Ten years have passed since the shooting, and sadly, extreme acts of violence continue to plague our society. The vigil at Lake Eola and many other remembrance events that followed, however, provide a more optimistic view of our humanity. This is a community where neighbors stood together, with reverence for the 49 victims and hope for a more peaceful future that honors their memory. ■

CENTRAL FLORIDA

women in Sports

From resort lawns and college gymnasiums to professional stadiums and coastal breaks, women have shaped Central Florida's sports culture for more than a century. This timeline highlights a selection of milestones, large and small – from elite competition to everyday participation – tracing how access, visibility, and leadership in women's sports steadily expanded across the region. Together, these moments reflect both individual achievement and the broader community that made it possible.

1880s–1890s – Women participate in croquet, tennis, and horseback riding at Florida resort hotels catering to winter visitors. Bicycling becomes popular among women in Florida, sparking debates about dress, health, and propriety.

1910s – Women play informal golf at Central Florida courses, often during off-peak hours.

1920s – Women golfers gain visibility at Florida golf resorts and country clubs.

1920s – Orlando-area hotels host women's swimming and tennis exhibitions.

1927 – Twenty women, led by Helen W. Strickland and Catherine L. Dann, form the Orlando Women's Golf Association, and the Florida Women's State Golf Association (FWSGA) Championship takes place in Mount Plymouth.

1930s – Women's softball emerges as a popular recreational sport during the Great Depression.

1930s – Rollins College women compete in intercollegiate golf and tennis.

1940s – Women fill athletic and recreational leagues while many men serve in World War II, and industrial and company-sponsored women's softball teams flourish in Central Florida.

1940s–1950s – Orlando's Dubsdread Golf Club hosts legendary women players including Patty Berg and Babe Didrikson Zaharias.

1950s – At Cypress Gardens, Willa McGuire Cook revolutionizes water skiing.

1950s – Women bowl competitively in Central Florida leagues, and Florida women compete in amateur golf tournaments statewide.

1950s–1960s – Trailblazing women wrestlers, including the Fabulous Moolah and Babs Wingo, appear on programs at Orlando's Legion Arena.

1950s–1970s – Swim instructor Marge Heil teaches Central Florida children at pools at the Aquaseum and Cherry Plaza, and at Winter Park's Dinky Dock.

1950s–1960s – Led by Marge Ricker, the Orlando Rebels gain national recognition as an elite women's fastpitch softball team.

1960s–1970s – Cocoa Beach emerges as a center for women's surfing on Florida's East Coast, and Mary Anne Hayes becomes a pioneering competitive surfer and later an inductee into the East Coast Surfing Hall of Fame.

1972 – Title IX reshapes women's sports opportunities nationwide.

1970s – Girls' high school athletics expand across Central Florida counties.

1972 – Diane Holbrook becomes the first girl to play on the Lake Howell High School soccer team.

1970s – Women's collegiate sports programs grow at Rollins College and other regional institutions.

1970s–1980s – Professional champion Sharon Wolfe Cranston competes nationally while maintaining ties to the Cocoa Beach surf community.

1970s – Women golfers benefit from expanded access to courses and competitive tournaments.

1975 – At age 13, Orlando native Dot Richardson becomes the youngest player to compete in a women's major national fastpitch championship.

1970s–1980s – Mimi Chan rises to international prominence in martial arts.

1980s – Chan helps establish Central Florida as a hub for martial arts training and competition.

1980s – Women increasingly compete in nontraditional sports such as martial arts and weightlifting.

1980s–1990s – Cari Coats helps found the Orlando Magic's marketing team and becomes one of the highest-ranking women in professional sports leadership.

1989 –The Ladies Professional Golf Association finalizes its move to Daytona Beach and begins developing LPGA International as the official headquarters of the golf organization.

1980s–Michelle Akers becomes a pioneering figure in women's soccer at the University of Central Florida, later joining the Orlando Pride as a coach.

1980s–1990s – Women expand participation in road racing, triathlons, and endurance sports.

1990s – Youth soccer becomes a major pipeline for girls' athletics.

1990s – Women officials, coaches, and administrators take on expanded leadership roles in local sports.

1994 – Orlando hosts the FIFA World Cup soccer tournament after years of leadership by Joanie Schirm, chair of the bid and host committee.

1996 – During softball's Olympic debut, Dot Richardson hits the home run that wins the game for the U.S. national team.

1997 – The Jones High School varsity girls' basketball team wins the Florida state championship, a title they repeat in 2004.

1998 – Orlando is granted a WNBA expansion franchise, the Orlando Miracle. The team relocated after the 2002 season.

2016 – The Orlando Pride set an NWSL attendance record during their inaugural season, signaling strong regional support for women's professional soccer.

2010s–2020s – World-class surfers train and compete along Brevard County's coast, reinforcing the region's role in women's surfing history.

2010s–2020s – Central Florida women excel in sports including golf, soccer, track and field, mixed martial arts, and adaptive athletics.

2017 – Brazilian player Marta Vieira da Silva joins the Orlando Pride. Today she holds the all-time World Cup scoring record, across all genders, with 17 goals.

Orlando Pride

2020s – Athletes, fans, and advocates push for greater equity, pay, and media coverage for women athletes.

2024 – The Orlando Pride win both the NWSL Shield and the NWSL Championship, marking a historic season for women's professional sports in Central Florida.

FROM SERVICE TO CELEBRATION

BY CHEYENNE STASTYSHYN

A VETERAN, COMMUNITY BUILDER, AND KEEPER OF HISTORY, DOROTHY TURNER JOHNSON EXEMPLIFIED A LIFE SHAPED BY SERVICE AND SUSTAINED BY PURPOSE.

The year 2026 marks the commemoration of the 250th anniversary of the United States of America. As we approach this milestone to celebrate our country's endurance, we are also asked to reflect on the people who turned their lives into missions of service, pushing our democracy forward, often unrecognized. One such individual is Dorothy Turner Johnson, a Black woman whose life journey from military service during World War II to community leadership in Central Florida demonstrates how the power of individual actions can inspire collective change.

Reflecting on Johnson's life and service invites us to consider a question at the heart of America 250: What does it truly mean to be a community member in a democracy still striving to live up to its promise?

GEORGIA ROOTS AND A CALL TO SERVE

Dorothy Turner Johnson was born in Dublin, Georgia, on Jan. 18, 1915. She came of age during a time of racial segregation, limited opportunity, and inequality for African Americans in the Jim Crow South. Her father was an educator and taught children in their community who did not have access to school because they had to help their families in the fields.

Johnson was one of the few African Americans in her community to gain an education beyond high school. Inspired by her father, she earned a college degree from the University of Wisconsin. While her story is one of successes and hard work, she grew up in a nation that demanded loyalty and labor from Black Americans while still denying full access to citizenship rights. Yet, when global conflict threatened the future of democracy in 1942, she answered the call to serve.

When she was 27 years old, Johnson enlisted in the United States Army, joining the Women's Army Corps (WAC). Her enlistment alone was proof enough of her courage, as Black women faced discrimination not only in civilian life but also within the military. Opportunities were limited for Black women, and respect was not something to be expected. Still, Johnson and thousands of other Black women believed that service could be both a duty and a strategy to claim space in a nation that had long marginalized them.

BETHUNE AND THE SIX TRIPLE EIGHT

While courageous, Johnson's enlistment would not have been possible without the tireless advocacy of Mary McLeod Bethune, an educator, a civil rights leader, and one

National Archives

Capt. Charity Adams drills her company at the first Women's Army Corps Training Center at Fort Des Moines, Iowa. Later promoted to major and lieutenant colonel, Adams was part of the first WAC officer candidate class and the first of her group to receive a commission.

Library of Congress

Mary McLeod Bethune, president of Bethune-Cookman College, and first lady Eleanor Roosevelt speak to a National Youth Administration meeting in 1939.

of the most influential Black women in American history.

In 1904, Bethune founded the Daytona Literary and Industrial Training School for Negro Girls, which later became Bethune-Cookman University. Predominantly in the years leading up to World War II, she recognized that there were many meaningful wartime roles from which Black women were largely excluded. She used her passion and influence to establish the National Council of Negro Women to advocate for the participation of Black women in civic, political, and educational activities.

By 1938, Bethune became the first Black woman to lead a federal agency as director of the Division of Negro Affairs in the National Youth Administration, working alongside first lady Eleanor Roosevelt to instill these initiatives into the country's political and social landscape. Through her leadership in what became known as the Black Cabinet, Bethune helped open doors for Black women that had long been sealed shut.

This advocacy paved the way for the creation of the 6888th Central Postal Directory Battalion, known as the "Six Triple Eight." It was the first and only predominantly Black, multiethnic Women's Army Corps battalion deployed overseas during World War II. Johnson was among the women who stepped through that door.

Formed to support the Allied fight against rising fascism in Europe, the 6888th Battalion was tasked with a mission that was both daunting and emotionally vital. They were restoring low morale through the delivery of mail. Their motto, "No mail, low morale," reflected a profound understanding of the human psyche during turbulent times. Letters from home were lifelines, connecting soldiers to the families and futures to which they hoped to return.

PERILOUS BUT VITAL DUTY

In early February 1945, the 6888th began its deployment to Britain. Johnson was part of a group that sailed in March, embarking on a nine-day transatlantic journey. The voyage was perilous. German U-boats prowled the waters, forcing evasive maneuvers that emphasized the real danger these women faced, even before arriving at their assignment. They ultimately reached Scotland safely, then traveled by train to Birmingham, England, where the scale of their task became clear.

AMERICA 250

Awaiting the servicewomen was an overwhelming backlog of 17 million pieces of undelivered mail. Many items were improperly addressed, some only bearing first names, nicknames, or common surnames. Much of the mail had been damaged by sitting for so long that moisture deteriorated the letters, and food sent via mail had spoiled and began to mold. This rendered conventional sorting methods useless. Army officials feared the backlog was actively damaging troop morale. Yet, despite the enormity of the challenge, the women of the 6888th were expected to succeed quickly and quietly.

The battalion's success was the result of ingenuity, discipline, and assertive leadership. When a general attempted to send an officer to instruct the women on how to complete their work, the battalion's commanding officer, Major Charity Adams, firmly refused, declaring, "Sir, over my dead body, sir!" Her response symbolized a broader refusal to accept condescension or doubt.

Johnson and her fellow soldiers devised their own system to address the backlog. They created and maintained a massive card-index system, eventually totaling seven million cards, to distinguish between individuals with similar names using military serial numbers. They worked seven days a week, in three shifts per day, with each shift processing an estimated 65,000 pieces of mail. What was projected to take six months was completed in just three months.

After completing the Herculean task of organizing the mail backlog, the battalion was sent across the English Channel to France, where another backlog awaited; some letters were more than three years old. Without weapons, WAC military police trained in hand-to-hand combat to protect their workspaces and maintain order. By October 1945, they had cleared the backlog and were relocated to Paris.

As the war ended, the size of the 6888th was reduced, with hundreds of women discharged by January 1946. The battalion received the European-African-Middle Eastern Campaign Medal and the World War II Victory Medal, acknowledging its contributions to the Allied victory.

Yet, when the unit returned to the United States in February 1946, there was no parade, no public celebration, and little recognition. The battalion was quietly disbanded in New Jersey, and its members returned to a country that largely overlooked their service.

This experience reflected a broader reality faced by Black veterans. During the war, African American leaders promoted the "Double V" campaign – victory over fascism abroad and victory over racism at home. While the first victory was achieved, the second remained out of grasp. Many Black veterans encountered indifference or hostility upon their return from military service. This renewed people's determination to challenge inequality within American society.

SERVICE CONTINUES IN FLORIDA

For Johnson, the lessons of service did not end with her discharge. She eventually became one of the first residents to settle in the new

WACs and French civilians sort packages at the 17th Base Post Office, Paris, France, Nov. 7, 1945.

National Archives

community of Celebration, Florida, in 2002, carrying with her the discipline, resilience, and sense of purpose forged during wartime.

The same year, she brought together a group of committed Central Floridians to establish the Central Florida branch of the Association for the Study of African American Life and History (ASALH).

Founded originally by historian Carter G. Woodson in 1915, ASALH is dedicated to researching, preserving, and promoting Black history. Johnson's leadership ensured that African American stories would be documented, shared, and honored in Central Florida.

Her work transformed the Central Florida landscape by turning memory and history into an actionable, living resource to serve the Black community and document the important history being forged by community members.

Dorothy Turner Johnson's life offers a powerful lens through which to reflect on America 250. Her journey reminds us that patriotism is practiced through our everyday actions, like advocacy work, community engagement, and service. Democracy is strengthened by people willing to show up, do the work, and create systems that uplift others. In Johnson's own words, "A well-lived life comes from what you do. . . . There's something good about just showing up." ■

A screen capture from Dorothy Turner Johnson's oral history in the Library of Congress.

Edna Giles Fuller was the first woman elected to the Florida House of Representatives, in 1928. She represented Orange County and was elected again in 1931.

Orlando as America's Melting Pot

By Sebastian Garcia

Image courtesy of Jasbir Mehta

The Asian Cultural Association has presented in various elementary schools across Central Florida, educating children about Indian culture through music. This photo captures Surabhi Adesh (left) and Prytush Goberdhan (right) performing for students at Maitland Middle School in 2021.

As the United States approaches its 250th anniversary this July, Central Florida may seem an unlikely place to look for insight into the nation's history. After all, when Americans think about the founding era, they tend to picture Independence Hall in Philadelphia or battlefields like Gettysburg, not a region best known today for theme parks. Yet Orlando and Orange County encapsulate a defining feature of modern American identity: a social and cultural melting pot shaped by immigration, especially since the late 20th and early 21st centuries.

In 1990, about 51,000 foreign-born immigrants lived in Orange County, or 7 percent of the county's total population, according to census data and other studies. Thirty-four years later, in 2024, that number increased to about 360,000 foreign-born immigrants, or roughly a quarter of Orange County's total population. The city of Orlando experienced a similar pattern during this time.

Who are these immigrants, and what are their stories? Most importantly, how have they shaped the history of Central Florida through their influence on politics, culture, and the economy? Drawing on oral histories I collected for the Florida Historical Society's Library of Florida History, this article highlights individuals whose lives reflect the changing cultural and ethnic contours of Greater Orlando since the late 20th century. By focusing on these narrators, we gain a fuller understanding of people often ignored in the histories of our city and nation, yet who have contributed significantly to both. We'll begin with Jasbir Mehta of Orlando.

Jasbir Mehta

"When I came to Orlando, there was nothing here," Jasbir Mehta recalled in May 2025. "There were not that many Indians." Mehta was born in 1955 in Sri Ganganagar, a city in the northernmost part of the state of Rajasthan, India, near the border with Pakistan. She emigrated to the United States in 1976 to pursue higher education at the University of Pittsburgh, as such opportunities remained limited in India for women at that time.

In 1989, Mehta moved to Orlando. That same year, she founded the Asian Cultural Association (ACA) to address the lack of programming in the area that highlighted and supported Indian culture. "If I have to raise my kids and for them to be exposed to the kind of stuff that I grew up with or that I wanted culturally, which I thought the kids should learn, then I have to start this on my own," she recalled. "And so I invited 17 people to my house, fed them, gave them tea, and asked

them to cough up 50 dollars apiece. And that was how I started the organization."

Mehta initially focused on Indian music, leveraging her connections with musicians and partnering with institutions such as the University of Central Florida (UCF), Rollins College, and Stetson University to expand her reach because, in her view, "you cannot build an audience without the education." In addition, she invited Indian musicians like Zakir Hussain to sold-out crowds at Orlando's Beacham Theater and Sanford's Helen Stairs Theatre.

Mehta also created the first accredited course in Indian music in the state of Florida through Stetson University and later UCF. In 1991, only two years after she founded the ACA, the organization held its first South Asian Film Festival at the Enzian Theater in Maitland. "At that time, there was no forum for independent filmmakers to present their work, which could be sold to distributors. . . . So I wanted to use that as a format that if an independent filmmaker presents his work, then some distributor would want to take the movie on," she recalled. The event remains the oldest South Asian Film Festival in North America, according to Mehta.

She continued to expand ACA's programming to include visual and performing arts, while always maintaining the educational focus of these initiatives. "At one point in [the] Seminole County system, we were one of the largest providers of the outreach program," Mehta noted. "We used to reach twenty [and] thirty thousand kids. And now also we have a program [that] any school calls us to give a presentation, we are definitely there."

No other organization has hosted more cultural programming aimed at preserving South Asian heritage through education and entertainment than the ACA. As a result, Jasbir has added to the multicultural contours of the City Beautiful, especially for an immigrant group that today ranks among the top ten largest immigrant populations in Orlando – a drastic shift from when Mehta first arrived in 1989.

Sisters Anne Tsoi and Shally Wong

Sisters Lai Fai "Anne" Tsoi and Shally Wong also carved out their own spaces in Orlando as immigrants from Hong Kong, preserving their cultural heritage while embracing new life in America.

Born in 1958, Tsoi was the eldest child in a single-mother household and assumed the role of financially supporting the family. She emigrated to Orlando in 1980 to earn more money for her family and found work at Jin Ho, one of the area's few Chinese restaurants at the time. She and her husband leveraged this scarcity and opened their own restaurant, China Chef, in 1985 at the corner of Goldenrod Road and University Boulevard. Her husband worked as a cook, and she managed the business.

The birth of her son a few years earlier made it difficult to run the business full time. Yet, she had no other choice – she needed to make

Left: ACA pamphlet from the 1991 event featuring Indian musician Shivkumar Sharma, invited by Jasbir Mehta (center, right) to perform as one of the first artists featured in ACA cultural programs. Right: ACA promotional flyer highlighting the 1992 event featuring Zakir Hussain.

a living both for her family here and her family back in Hong Kong. Every morning she went to the restaurant to plan the day's work, she recalled. "I have to buy ingredients because [it was] not a big restaurant. It was about twelve tables, and it was 2000 square feet.

When people would ask Tsoi why she had to keep working when she had her son to raise, she would tell them, "When something [is] facing you, you have to overcome the difficulty. You have to do it. So we worked very hard for the restaurant." The hard work paid off – she and her husband achieved the American dream of social and economic mobility by buying a house in Orlando and filing paperwork to bring their families, including her younger sister Shally Wong, to the United States.

"I remember my sister send every month 400 [U.S. dollars] to us in Hong Kong, and that 400 meant a lot," reflected Wong. "She had been working, working, working, so we know we need to work. . . . If you work, you will make a living." Wong was born in 1969, and with Tsoi's sponsorship, she emigrated to the United States in 1991. She permanently settled in Orlando in 1999, around the same time that her sister and brother-in-law opened a new, larger Chinese restaurant called China Garden at the intersection of University and Semoran boulevards.

Courtesy of Shally Wong

Anne Tsoi hosted several cultural events at China Garden to attract more customers, reflecting how immigrants contribute to local society and economy through culture. This photograph captures a Chinese New Year event at China Garden in the year 2000.

Both Wong's and Tsoi's time at China Garden broadly reflected the immigrant experience in Central Florida of finding innovative ways to contribute to local society through culture. Managing a large-scale restaurant with over a hundred seats required Tsoi to host cultural events to attract more customers. "We [thought], 'what is the way to attract more people?' We have to do a celebration. . . . If we have some kind of Chinese festival, we would put a little celebration. Like Chinese New Year, we [put] a special menu to attract people, let them book the table, and we even have a performance there in the restaurant," Tsoi explained.

This transformation of China Garden into an explicit cultural space also placed Wong, who helped her sister manage the restaurant, in conversations with patrons that revealed a lack of understanding of Asian people and heritage. She was able to observe "kind of how little people [knew] about Asian American[s]," she recalled. During her work at the restaurant, she found that many people "tend to ask you a lot of questions that you kind of surprised that they did not know."

As a result, in 2005, Wong and her husband created *Asia Trend*, a nonprofit online magazine that promotes Asian American culture by circulating information about Asian American happenings across the state. It remains the first statewide magazine in Florida focused on this community. "That was the time that the population was growing. People want to know more . . . especially with the internet," explained Wong.

The online magazine's success contributed to the rise of the Asian American population in Central Florida, according to Wong. One New York couple cited it as the reason for their move to Orlando, for example. "They called me and said they really think that Orlando is really vibrant, especially in the Asian community," she

Courtesy of Shally Wong

Shally Wong (middle, seated) and Anne Tsoi (middle, top) with China Garden customers in 2003.

Shally Wong (middle left) and Anne Tsoi (middle right) hold a proclamation celebrating the 20th anniversary of *Asia Trend* in 2025.

said. "They really want to move down here because of the magazine."

Asia Trend has also supported local Asian businesses through advertisements placed throughout the publication. "I have an example that people from California got to buy a business from one of our advertisers," said Wong.

Her role as a special assistant to Orange County Mayor Jerry Demings, a position she began in 2019, has allowed her to further expand *Asia Trend*'s cultural outreach. "It is like a dream job for me," Shally recounted; "I got over 800 contacts in my email list, and many of them are community leaders who have members in their organization." Through her work in the mayor's office, her goal is to work closely with more than 30 organizations – work that's greatly needed, she said, because "there is a lack of Asian American representation."

Wong's sister Anne Tsoi joined *Asia Trend* after she retired in 2017 and currently serves as its president. She remains proud of what her family has accomplished. "I can tell now [that] more people know Asian culture," she said. "Even when I talked to some of the American[s], . . . they can say *Zaoshang*, which means 'good morning' in Chinese. I feel very happy." She also describes feeling a greater sense of belonging in Orlando.

Janmabhumi and Karmabumi

The life stories of Jasbir Mehta, Anne Tsoi, Shally Wong, and the others in the FHS Oral History Project give us a more holistic mosaic of the varied people who have shaped Central Florida since the late 20th century. Taken together, they embody America's melting pot. As Mehta eloquently put it, "America gave me the confidence that I could do what I wanted to do. . . . In our culture, we have *janmabhumi* and *karmabumi*. Janmabhumi is the earth, the place where you are born. And karmabumi is the one where destiny takes you, where you do all your workings in that. So we always say that India may be my janmabhumi, but America is my karmabumi. This is where I work. This is where I live. This is where my destiny is."

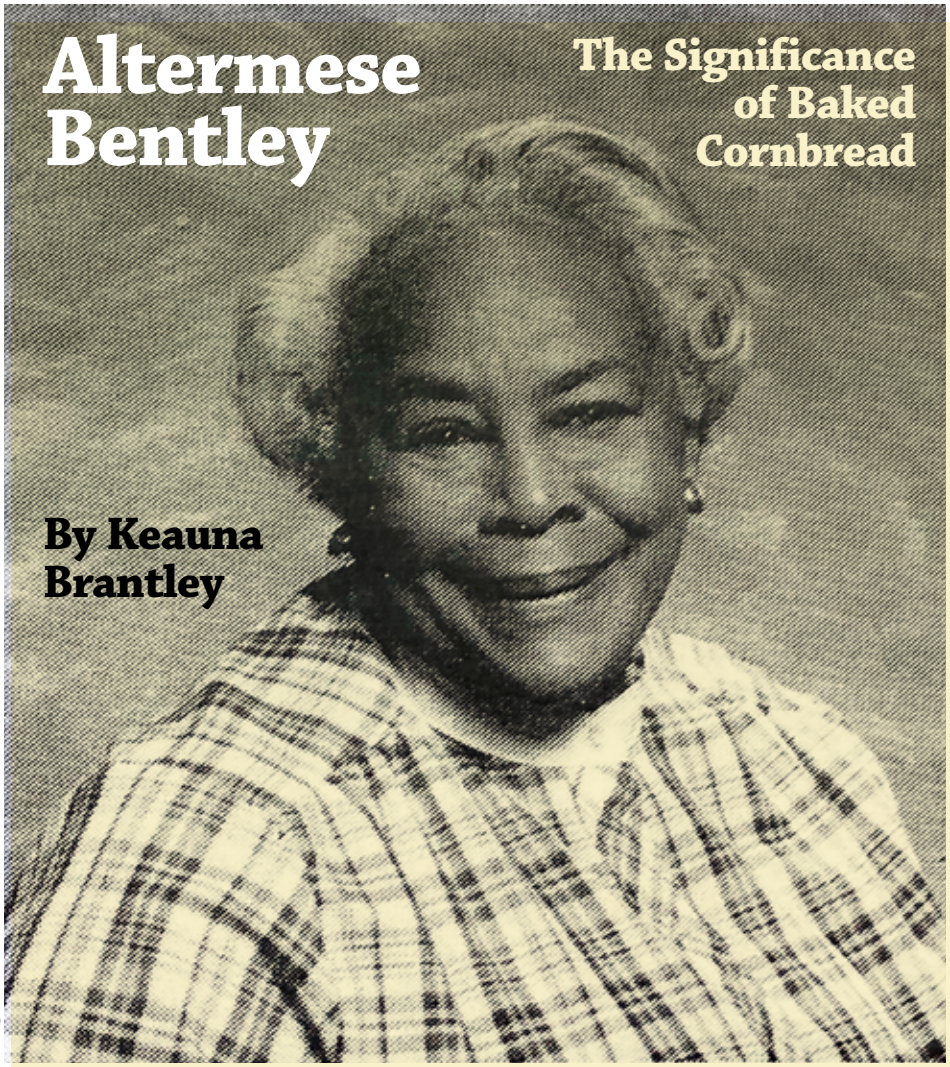
Thus, during the time of national remembrance that will come with our nation's 250th anniversary, we must not view Orlando as a vacation destination or a departure from everyday reality, but as a place that reflects the multicultural and multiethnic lived experience that has shaped America's history and identity. ■

Note: To learn more about Jasbir Mehta, Anne Tsoi, Shally Wong, and others, please visit the Florida Historical Society Oral History Project at MyFloridaHistory.org/library/oral-history. The project preserves the life stories of 50 individuals from across 25 countries who have called Central Florida home and have shaped the region's culture, economy, and politics since the mid-to-late 20th century.

In 2005, Shally Wong and her husband, Gary Lau, created *Asia Trend*, a nonprofit online magazine that promotes Asian American culture across Florida.

Altermese Bentley

The Significance of Baked Cornbread



findagrave.com

By Keauna Brantley

Early Black settlers played essential roles in developing the economic and social infrastructure of Central Florida. In the Sanford area during the antebellum period, these settlers were primarily composed of two groups: those who fled from enslavement on northern plantations and those who arrived along with the planters who enslaved them. Throughout Reconstruction, settlement that was originally concentrated in northern Florida and along the coast expanded into Central Florida, causing the area's Black population to rise exponentially. Honoring the legacy of these early Black settlers is essential to interpreting the life of Altermese Bentley, a local historian, author, educator, and native of Georgetown – an important, historically Black community.

Honoring Black pioneers

Bentley and her family represent a cohort of notable Black pioneers who settled in Central Florida around the turn of the 20th century. Their efforts were vital in turning Sanford into an agricultural powerhouse, a hub of Black self-government, and an epicenter for educational opportunities for Black youth. Bentley's life is representative of the fruits of this labor, and it is through her work that she imprinted on recent generations the importance of remembering the labor of previous generations – as she expressed it, the importance of honoring the "significance of baked cornbread."

During Reconstruction, the development of railroad systems in Florida and growing investments into local agricultural industries demanded a larger workforce. Often, Black workers were recruited to settle in Central Florida for their agricultural knowledge and to satisfy a growing demand for inexpensive labor. Gen. Henry Sanford was among those who led local investment and labor recruitment. In the 1870s, Sanford brought 60 Black laborers from Madison in north Florida to work at his St. Gertrude Grove. While some laborers were able to form towns near railroad yards, segregation and racial violence limited the number of neighborhoods available for a growing Black community.

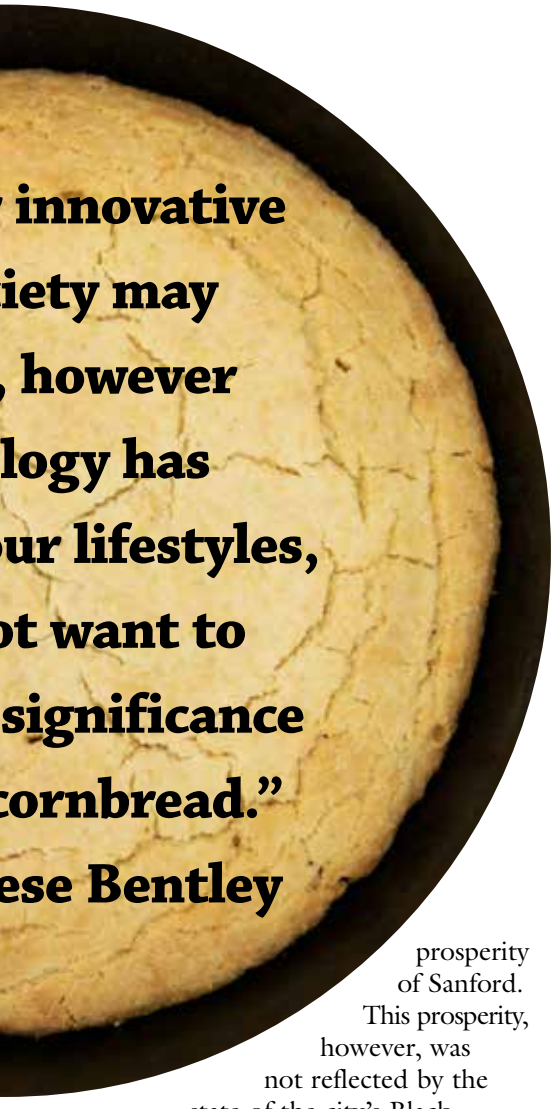
After a group of white "shotgun policy" men attacked Black workers at Sanford's labor camp, Sanford turned to white immigrant laborers – laying the foundation for the Swedish community of Upsala – and established Georgetown, a segregated Black community situated on the flat marshland west of Mellonville.

Bentley's grandfather Smith

Burnett was among the first Black laborers that Henry Sanford recruited from north Florida. In the 1880s, Burnett purchased a plot of land from Sanford through the Florida Land and Colonization Company. Once Burnett was settled in Georgetown with his wife, Susan, and their two children, he worked for the city as a lamplighter while Susan Burnett earned money as a domestic worker.

Poverty and terror

Throughout Reconstruction and into the early 20th century, Black laborers continuously contributed to the prosperity of Sanford. This prosperity, however, was not reflected by the state of the city's Black neighborhoods. Despite the economic success of many of Central Florida's agricultural centers, most workers could not live on the wages earned in celery fields and citrus groves alone. Although some could find supplemental income as domestic workers, many Black laborers from Sanford would migrate to farms in the North during the spring or summer seasons for work. Alice Branson Mathis is one example of the many Black farm workers who migrated between Sanford and New York to supplement their humble wages.



In addition to economic challenges, domestic terrorist groups such as the Ku Klux Klan staunchly opposed the upward mobility of African Americans nationwide. Sanford was no exception to this nadir of race relations in American history. Altermese Bentley was born in 1910; in recounting her youth, she noted a "visible presence of the KKK marching through the negro community posting signs warning farm laborers not to ask for more pay." The general economic status of Black people throughout the region, compounded with racial terrorism and inadequate government funding, led to starkly underfunded public institutions within Black communities.

Devotion to education

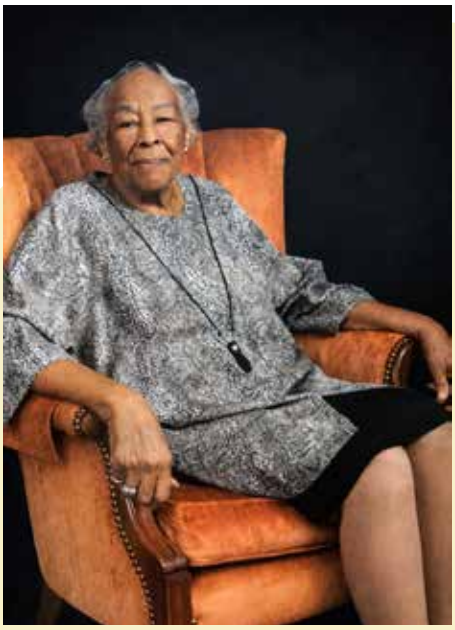
However, just as Bentley saw the evolution of cornbread from a symbol of hardship to a beacon of strength and resilience, relationships that had been continuously disrupted throughout enslavement became key pillars of social infrastructure within burgeoning Black communities. According to Bentley, parents and teachers would often rely on crowdfunding efforts to circumvent meager funding for schools serving Black children. Despite the lack of money, Black residents maintained a strong devotion to education, and schools emerged as central institutions around which communities were built.

One example is the historic Hopper Academy. Originally named Colored School No. 11, it was formed in 1910 as Sanford's first school for Black children and continued to serve students until 1962. In the years following desegregation, Hopper Academy ceased to operate as a school and eventually fell into disrepair. When school officials proposed to burn down the building in the 1990s, Bentley advocated for its preservation, stating, "The school was like the church – it was our hub."

Advocacy by key community members such as Bentley was key to preserving this historic site. In June 1991, Seminole County commissioners approved an

Library of Congress

In 1937, workers in Sanford fields pull young celery shoots out of the beds before replanting.



application made by the Community Improvement Association of Sanford for a $100,000 federal grant to renovate the building. Today, it remains on Pine Avenue in Sanford and is listed as Seminole County's oldest surviving Black school.

Like many others in the Georgetown community, Bentley's parents valued education. As a child, she went to a private kindergarten, and after the 9th grade, she spent some time at the Florida Normal School, a religious boarding school in St. Augustine, during the months when school wasn't offered for Black schoolchildren in Seminole County. She received postsecondary education from Shaw, Temple, and Pepperdine universities.

Following her graduation from Shaw University in 1932, Bentley began work as a Jeanes teacher in Live Oak, in north Florida – a position made possible by the Jeanes Foundation (also known as the Negro Rural School Fund), established in 1907 by Quaker philanthropist Anna T. Jeanes to develop educational opportunities for rural African Americans in the South through investment in Black educators.

After her marriage and the birth of her daughter, Bentley continued her career as an educator in Philadelphia. She worked as a teacher and school administrator for over 20 years until her retirement in 1975.

A historic legacy

Retirement prompted Bentley's return to Central Florida. She moved back to East Ninth Street in what's now the Georgetown Historic District of Sanford, on the same lot where her grandfather had built his home in the 1880s. It was during this period that she first took steps toward recording the history of Black communities throughout Seminole County. One of her initial steps was returning to school. She enrolled in Seminole Community College and began the first drafts of her book *Georgetown: The History of a Black Neighborhood*, as a writing assignment. Her research led her to co-curate three exhibitions with historian Brenda Elliott, who in 1990 had created the first comprehensive survey of Seminole County's oldest Black communities.

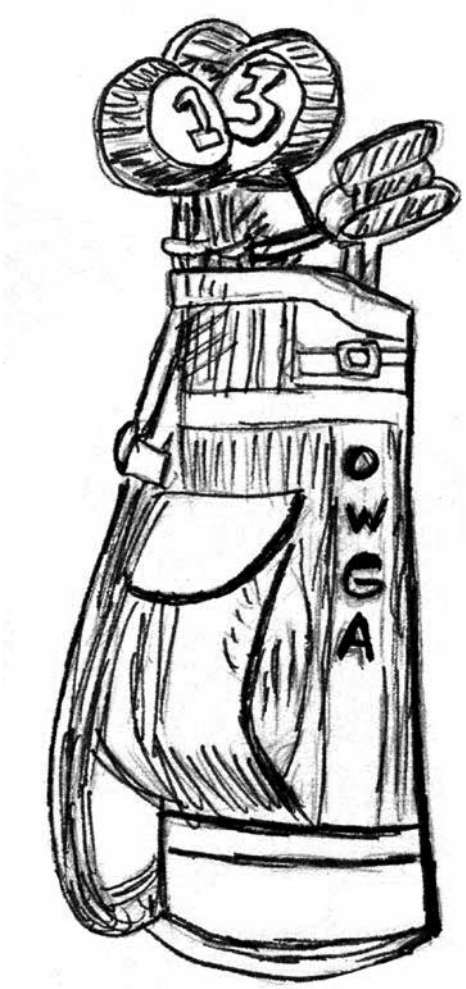
Altermese Bentley, second from left, at the 2001 opening of the school that bears her name, and in other portraits through the years, at top of page.

The first of the three exhibitions, on the Black church, was displayed at the Orange County Historical Museum in February 1990; the second, which focused on Georgetown, was exhibited at the Seminole County Public Schools Student Museum; and the third highlighted the labor contributions of Sanford's Black community. Bentley went on to author four books and tirelessly advocate for the preservation of Seminole County's Black history and historical landmarks.

Altermese Bentley's legacy in Sanford is honored not only through awards but also in the very institutions that continue to serve the community. In August 2000, the Seminole County School Board voted unanimously to name a new elementary school in Sanford after her. When asked to choose the school's colors, Bentley selected forest green, explaining that it symbolized how schools should "nurture and protect youngsters the way a forest does a deer." Bentley Elementary School opened the following year, on Aug. 6, 2001, with an estimated enrollment of 550 students, a number that has nearly doubled today.

Altermese Bentley's work stands as a testament to the power of memory, education, and place. Through her writing, teaching, and advocacy, she not only preserved the stories of Sanford's Black communities but also deepened our understanding of their enduring impact on Central Florida's history. She died in August 2004 at the age of 93, but her legacy lives on in the institutions she helped protect, the students she inspired, and the generations who now walk the streets of Sanford with a clearer sense of where they come from – and why that history matters. ■

FROM THE COLLECTION THE ORLANDO WOMEN'S GOLF ASSOCIATION



In 1927, a group of Orlando women traded their cups of tea for tournament cups on the golf course. Twenty women led by Helen W. Strickland and Catherine L. Dann played a round of golf once a week, alternating between Dubsdread Golf Course and the Country Club of Orlando. These women golfers would become the Orlando Women's Golf Association (OWGA). By 1929, the group was the third largest women's golf association in the state.

During the association's initial years, many of its tournaments and events were recorded in the *Orlando Sentinel*. Because the members were women, news of the organization was typically relegated to the society pages, often called the women's pages. Mentions of ladies' amateur golf tournaments appeared among articles about galas, book clubs, luncheons, and teas. In keeping with the custom of the time, players were identified by their husband's names – for example, Mrs. George Strickland or Mrs. Carl Dann Jr. In its sports pages, the *Sentinel* painted a more competitive picture, often reporting player stats and rivalries between different women's clubs throughout Florida.

After World War II, the Orlando Women's Golf Association continued its prowess as a group of amateur women golfers known throughout the state. Members such as Peggy Brass, Rose Skillman, and Elaine Lustig are highlighted in the group's own scrapbooks, which were recently donated to the History Center. Original photographs show women players posing in their best swing stance, and newspaper clippings illustrate the progression of women's social roles, as the golfers started to see their own first names in news reports, rather than only those of their husbands.

The OGWA scrapbooks depict women who not only played to win but valued equal opportunity to play a sport they loved. The group remains active today and continues its mission to connect low-handicap amateur women golfers for friendly competition and fun at premier golf courses in Central Florida. In 2027, the OWGA will celebrate its 100th anniversary. ■

Above: Visitors to The Magic of Disney Animation studio tour observe animators at work at the new Walt Disney Animation Florida studio. Opposite page: Early studio-tour guests view artists hand-painting animation cells.

Through the Glass: A Look at Walt Disney Feature Animation Florida

By Katie Kelley

For 15 remarkable years, a Central Florida studio allowed the world to witness the art of animation, not just as technology or spectacle, but as emotion, artistry, and a little bit of magic.

On a warm spring morning in 1989, visitors to the brand-new Disney-MGM Studios theme park pressed their faces to a long wall of glass. On the other side, a group of young artists hunched over drawing desks, flipping paper, sketching a rabbit being contorted around a roller coaster, and trying not to think about the 8,000 tourists watching their every move.

This was Walt Disney Animation Florida – a small studio brimming with big talent. Originally conceived as a theme-park attraction, it would, improbably, grow into an impressive creative engine that helped to drive a Disney moviemaking renaissance. For 15 years the Florida team breathed life into beloved characters, experimented with emerging technologies, and eventually produced full-length animated features of their own. And then, almost suddenly, it was gone.

This is the story of the little animation studio behind the glass – how it started, how it grew, and why its legacy still lingers in the artists and films it produced.

Animation Is the Attraction

The seeds of the Walt Disney Company's Florida animation studio were planted in the mid-1980s, when

Disney CEO Michael Eisner poses with Mickey Mouse and Roger Rabbit ahead of the opening of the Disney-MGM Studios theme park.

a struggling animation division was suddenly handed a fresh lease on life. Roy E. Disney, Walt's nephew and a steadfast champion of the animation department, was instrumental in pushing the company to reclaim the artistry that had defined its golden years. Newly appointed CEO Michael Eisner supported this direction, and Roy Disney's persistence and belief in the medium drove the resurgence. The blockbuster success of *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* (1988) and *The Little Mermaid* (1989) affirmed his conviction that, with proper care and investment, animation could once again become a defining force for the company.

At the same time, Disney was preparing to open its third theme park in Florida, Disney-MGM Studios, designed to pay homage to old Hollywood and give guests a glimpse into the art of filmmaking. One of its signature attractions would be The Magic of Disney Animation, a curated experience aimed at teaching visitors how animation worked while celebrating the classic animated films of Disney's past. Walt Disney Animation Florida was conceived as part of the attraction – a small-scale yet fully operational studio that let guests see animators at work in the very process they were learning about along the way.

The attraction encapsulated something extraordinary, and the studio, separated from tourists by a floor-to-ceiling glass barrier, became a sensation. It wasn't just "edutainment." Tour guests were witnessing "Disney magic" happening in real time as the animators performed the previously invisible labor of crafting some of Disney's most beloved characters before their eyes.

To support the attraction, Disney assembled a quirky team that began with almost 80 people – veterans from *Roger Rabbit*, recent graduates, and young animators from California. The crew's first assignment was a seven-minute Roger Rabbit short, *Roller Coaster Rabbit*, both a training exercise and a test of whether serious animation work could happen under the constant gaze of park visitors.

As it turned out, it could. And the quality was high enough that Disney executives and the main studio in Burbank, California, took notice.

Proving Their Mettle

The early 1990s were an extraordinary moment for Disney animation. Starting with *The Little Mermaid* in 1989 and culminating with *The Lion King* in 1994, the studio released smash hit after smash hit. To keep up with the demanding schedule of one animated feature per year, Disney Feature Animation in Burbank needed help.

So the Florida team, which was originally meant to draw only short films and "featurettes," was soon tapped to help on feature films. First came ink-and-paint work on *The Rescuers Down Under* (1990), then full sequences for *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), *Aladdin* (1992), and *The Lion King* (1994). Florida artists earned a reputation for their strong character crafting and were tasked with increasingly prominent projects, including taking the lead on Jasmine and Rajah for *Aladdin* and young Simba and Nala on *The Lion King*.

Tourists still walked past artists every day, but now the work happening behind that glass was part of some of the most important animated films in history. And as the studio expanded, much more work was happening behind the scenes out of the view of guests.

Florida's young animators also became pioneers in a rapidly transforming industry. During this high-water moment, the Computer Animation Production System, or CAPS, was reshaping how animation was finished. Co-developed by Disney and Pixar, CAPS offered a digital ink, paint, and compositing platform that allowed Florida artists to bridge two eras: drawing by hand in the traditional style while collaborating digitally with teams in Burbank, where the CAPS system lived, through overnight FedEx shipments and dedicated fax lines.

A Studio With Its Own Spirit

In essence, Disney had unwittingly built not only a theme-park exhibit but a genuine second animation studio. Working behind glass created a strange dynamic for the animators, who were simultaneously backstage artists and onstage performers. At first they wore theme-park-style uniforms, kept to strict hours, and operated as park "cast members." But as their

responsibilities grew, so did their autonomy. Max Howard, a British theater manager turned studio head, fought to give his crew the freedom and creative environment of a real animation studio.

The result was a tight-knit, collaborative culture that veterans still describe with affection. The unusual setting bred a kind of mischievous camaraderie. Artists drew jokes to hold up to the glass for tourists, staged pranks on one another, and held impromptu drawing contests. And because visitors watched them work, the Florida crew developed a certain fearlessness.

The studio's spirit also manifested creatively. Barry Cook's experimental short *Off His Rockers* (1992), produced by Florida animators in moments between regular duties and often on their own time, pushed the boundaries of mixing hand-drawn and computer-generated imagery (CGI). It was perhaps a signal of the seismic shift computer animation was about to unleash across the industry. But the biggest test of the studio's capabilities lay ahead.

Becoming a Feature Studio: Mulan

By the mid-1990s, Disney Animation was feeling the pressure of fresh competition, with the entrance of Warner Bros. and DreamWorks into the animation scene and the emergence of fully computer-animated films. Amid this shifting landscape, the Florida studio team received the exciting news that they would produce their own full-length animated movie from start to finish.

The project – originally titled "China Doll" and later, *Mulan* – presented a monumental challenge for a studio that had started as a park attraction. Directors Barry Cook and Tony Bancroft, both early Florida crew members, led a team of more than 350 in the film's production.

Under the vision of production designer Hans Bacher and art director Ric Sluiter, the film's look was inspired by the watercolors of traditional Chinese art. The Florida studio's Mark Henn, who has come to be considered one of the most legendary animators of Disney's renaissance era, took the lead on drawing the titular heroine. The studio's effects artists embraced new technologies to create the film's most ambitious sequence in the charging horde of Hun warriors. The horde was generated by custom crowd-simulation software adapted from *The Lion King*'s wildebeest stampede.

When *Mulan* premiered in 1998, it was both a critical and artistic triumph. The film was a declaration that Walt Disney Feature Animation Florida was no longer a satellite. It was a studio with its own voice.

The Last Big Hits

After *Mulan*, the Florida studio was greenlit for additional features. In *Lilo & Stitch* (2002), writers and directors Chris Sanders and Dean DeBlois brought an offbeat, heartfelt story that embraced the Florida team's strengths of expressive character animation and unconventional humor, fostered in tight-knit studio culture. The team embraced a totally fresh look for the quirky characters that distinguished the film from others of the era. Artists even ventured over to Disney's Polynesian Resort to practice watercolor techniques to paint the film's unique backgrounds.

Above, left: Walt Disney Feature Animation Florida circa 1995. Above, right: Members of the Florida studio pose at the Great Wall during a research trip to China in preparation for the production of *Mulan*.

Courtesy of Dominic Carola.

Above, left: Brother Bear character and background sketch. Right: Former Florida studio animators Paulo Alvarado, Gregg Azzopardi, Dominic Carola, Glen Gagnon, and John Webber launched a new studio, Project Firefly, immediately following the closure of Walt Disney Feature Animation Florida

The film was a hit, spawning sequels, a television series, and one of Disney's most beloved modern characters. Internally, *Lilo & Stitch* was seen as proof that smaller, creatively focused productions could succeed.

Two years later, the studio's third and final feature, *Brother Bear* (2004), was developed "idea to screen" entirely in Orlando. Longtime Florida artists Aaron Blaise and Robert Walker directed the ambitious story of transformation grounded in themes drawn from Inuit spirituality. But by its release, the winds at Disney had changed. The film received less marketing support and arrived amid declining corporate confidence in hand-drawn animation. Despite this, *Brother Bear* still showcased the studio's talent for lush environments, compelling character animation, and emotionally resonant storytelling.

A Changing Industry, an Abrupt End

In truth, the Florida studio's fate had likely been sealed years before it closed. The smash success of *Toy Story* (1995), *Shrek* (2001), and other computer-animated hits convinced Disney leadership that less expensive 3D animation should take priority over labor-intensive, hand-drawn films. Executives slashed budgets, reduced staff, and quietly ended development on traditionally animated features.

Tensions in the company's leadership between Michael Eisner and Roy E. Disney further destabilized the division. When Roy resigned in 2003 and launched his "Save Disney" campaign, traditional animation lost its internal champion.

On Nov. 14, 2003, the Florida team was abruptly told to stop work on their in-progress film, *A Few Good Ghosts*. Shortly before Christmas, they were informed the studio would close. In March 2004, after 15 years of creating some of Disney's most iconic characters, Walt Disney Feature Animation Florida shut its doors. A sign posted in the lobby on the crew's final day said simply: "Thank you for your talent, passion, and dedication, for making us feel like family and allowing us to share in the magic of animation with you. We wish you and your families the best."

Life After Disney

Although the studio closed, its legacy didn't vanish. While many Florida artists relocated to work in Burbank or join the likes of Pixar and DreamWorks, others stayed in Central Florida and founded new companies. Project Firefly (now Premise Entertainment) was one such venture, established by Florida studio animators operating out of Universal Studios Orlando's backlot. Project Firefly quickly landed work on *Curious George* (2006), which was a lifesaver for some animators who had been left adrift following the studio's close.

The films produced in Florida also left a lasting mark. *Mulan, Lilo & Stitch*, and *Brother Bear* remain fan favorites and are studied in animation programs around the world. Scenes created in the Florida studio – young Simba crying for Mufasa to wake up, Mulan's triumphant smile as she finally scales the training post, Stitch reminding Nani that family means nobody gets left behind – continue to resonate across generations.

Perhaps most meaningfully, the Florida studio proved something few believed in 1989: that great animation can flourish anywhere, even behind a glass wall in a theme park. Its legacy remains secure, created by artists who embraced innovation while holding fast to the human touch at the heart of animation. ■

2026 Milestones: Marking Enduring Orlando Institutions

Central Florida's civic life has long been shaped by organizations that grew along with the region itself. In 2026, the History Center notes the milestone anniversaries of these four institutions or landmarks whose stories reflect decades of community building, adaptation, and service. Also in 2026, other notable area organizations, including Orlando Family Stage and the Orlando Garden Club, mark a century since beginnings in 1926, a boom year of significant development in the city.

First Presbyterian Church of Orlando (150 years)

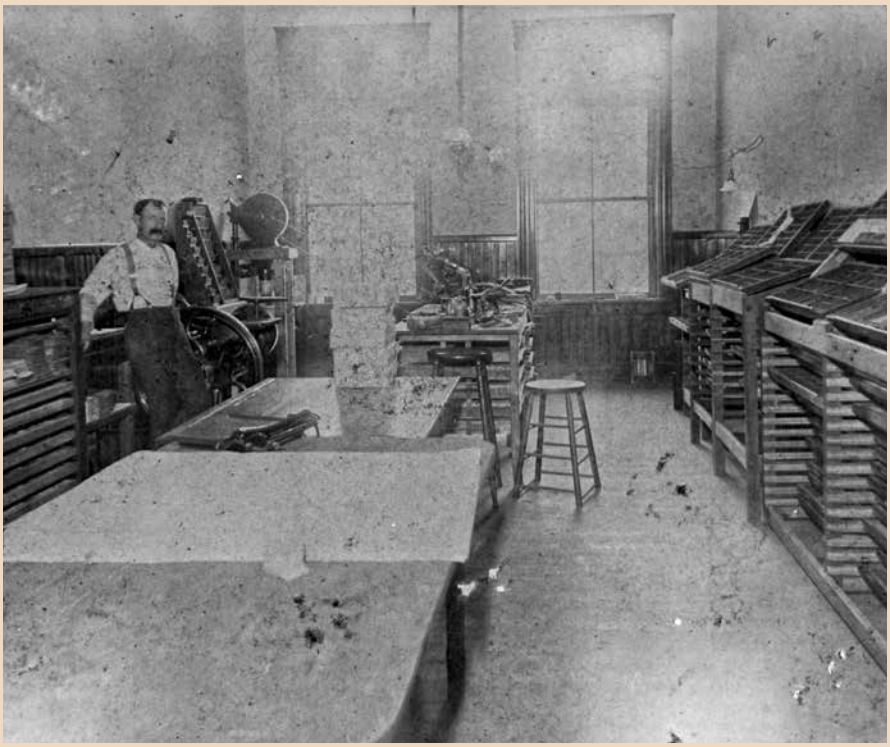
Few institutions have remained rooted in downtown Orlando as long as First Presbyterian Church. Founded in 1876 by a small group of settlers, the church is one of the city's oldest – and one of the few that has remained on essentially the same site for well over a century. Since 1889, the congregation has occupied land at Church Street and Magnolia Avenue, long identifying itself as "the Heart of the City."

During the 1920s land boom, the church served both longtime residents and waves of automobile travelers passing through Orlando, reflecting its role as a civic as well as spiritual anchor. After fire destroyed an earlier sanctuary, the congregation rebuilt and expanded over time, culminating in completion of the present Colonial-style sanctuary in 1955. Still rooted downtown, its history mirrors Orlando's own growth – defined by continuity, adaptation, and a lasting presence at the city's core.

Orlando Sentinel (150 years)

Orlando's oldest surviving business began as a frontier newspaper. Founded in 1876 as the *Orange County Reporter*, the *Orlando Sentinel* traces its roots to the city's earliest years. One of its defining moments came in 1884, when a devastating downtown fire destroyed the paper's printing plant. Publisher Mahlon Gore – later Orlando's mayor – refused to stop publishing, producing a "fire edition" with help from a Sanford press and rebuilding with strong community support.

The paper was shaped most decisively in the mid-20th century by editor and publisher Martin Andersen, who guided it through the Depression, World War II, and Orlando's postwar growth, transforming it into Central Florida's dominant daily newspaper. In 1988, the *Sentinel* earned its first Pulitzer Prize for "Florida's Shame," an editorial series exposing the costs of unchecked growth – affirming its long tradition of watchdog journalism.



Orlando Citrus Bowl Stadium (90 years)

Built during the New Deal, Orlando's iconic stadium opened in 1936. Originally known as Orlando Stadium, the venue long known as the Citrus Bowl was constructed as a Works Progress Administration project, seating just under 9,000 fans beside Tinker Field. From the start, the stadium reflected the city's ambitions, expanding steadily as Orlando grew and becoming home to major sporting and civic events.

While the first Tangerine Bowl game was played there in 1947, the stadium's legacy reaches far beyond football. After a major expansion in the 1970s, it became a national concert destination, hosting the legendary Rock Super Bowls between 1977 and 1983, with acts ranging from Fleetwood Mac and the Rolling Stones to Aerosmith and the Eagles. Rebuilt and modernized in the 21st century, the stadium – now known as Camping World Stadium – remains one of Orlando's most enduring public gathering places.

Girl Scouts of Citrus (70 years)

Girl Scouting arrived in Central Florida earlier than many realize. By the mid-1920s, troops were active in Orlando and Winter Park, taking part in civic events, outdoor excursions, and community projects during Florida's boom years. Troops at Orlando's Mount Zion Baptist Church in the late 1930s and early '40s offered leadership and fellowship for girls in the Black community at a time when such opportunities were sharply limited.

In 1956, these scattered troops were united with the incorporation of the Girl Scouts of Citrus Council (now Girl Scouts of Citrus), creating an Orlando-based regional organization serving girls across Central Florida. The rustic Girl Scout "Little House" in Orlando's Dickson Azalea Park, beloved for its stone fireplace and camp-like setting, has welcomed generations. In 2020, the organization opened the Women's History & Cultural Center, expanding its mission to celebrate the contributions of women and girls across the region.

The British Vision of Florida

The Founding Fathers and the Frontier

By Bennett Lloyd

AMERICA 250

In 1763, the British Empire finally achieved one of its long-standing goals: removal of the rival French from the great North American contest. The French and Indian War concluded in Britain's favor, leaving it with French cessions from Quebec to Grenada. The kingdom of Spain also sported bruises, having lost Havana and Manila to the British after allying with its French Bourbon relations in the last year of the war. During treaty negotiations, these empires sought to settle rivalries and accounts. British control of the continent now extended to the Mississippi River. France gave its Louisiana Territory to Spain. And in exchange for the return of Manila and Havana, Spain gave its two Florida colonies, East and West, to Great Britain.

A Wild Legacy

By the time the British acquired the two Floridas, they had wracked the land with punishing slave raids, intense sieges, and the mercenary encouragement of Indian wars. Gone were the centralized polities of Native people clustered around priestly missions and hidalgo-founded ranches. What smallpox had not ravaged, the British had systematically burned. Their Muskogee-speaking allies – the same ones the British consistently paid to raid the Spanish frontier land – expanded into the area and intermarried with the scattered remnants of Florida's original inhabitants long before its formal acquisition; the land was desolate enough that they called it "Seminoli,"

a word that implies something wild, untamed, or uncultivated. The inherited Floridas were a far cry from the densely populated and linguistically diverse world Pedro Menendez encountered in 1565 when he founded St. Augustine, East Florida's only surviving major city in 1763 and still its governing center.

To this city the crown of England sent skilled surveyors, naturalists, and entrepreneurs under the leadership of the new governor, James Grant. Now that they had Florida, what could they do with it? Much of England's colonial wealth lay in the Caribbean, and the edicts of the time sought to establish Florida as a plantation-fueled economy in the Caribbean vein. The land grant system promised vast tracts of 20,000 acres to anyone who could start a productive town within two years, and the upper middle class and younger sons of minor nobility flocked to register their acreage. But what could they grow?

William Bartram's *Travels*, published in 1791, documents his 1773-1777 journey through the South.

In Search of Answers

John Bartram made several trips to Florida from 1763 to 1773 as the crown's official botanist for North America, partly to establish its climatic conditions and determine if its natural resources could be monetized. He took his son William with him, and a few of their early reports survive from before William Bartram's 1791 publication of his famed *Travels*. John Bartram also relayed many of these observations to fellow famous naturalists such as Carl Linnaeus in Sweden. In the end, Florida became known for its timber – longleaf pines, bald cypress, and live oaks, all good for building structures and ships – and sugar and indigo became the go-to cash crops in the peninsula's subtropical environment.

But even as the British sought to establish *what* there was in Florida, they also had to establish *where* things were. To accomplish this, the crown hired William Gerard de Brahm, a German-born surveyor, and gave him the difficult task of surveying the territory while also juggling individual surveys from dozens of land claims to be filed with the governorship.

These expeditions even reached deep into Central Florida, where a metal-detected trade weight from 1765 highlights their presence as far inland as Seminole County, and De Brahm's 30-foot-long map of Florida's East Coast in the Kew Archive in London accurately depicts the shoreline of what is now Lake Harney.

On a later map from the 1780s, Lake Monroe is clearly visible (then named Lake Grant in honor of the governor), and Lake Jesup is visible as Lake Beresford, named for a land grantee who boasted a plantation farther downriver on a separate grant, also next to a lake named Beresford, which retains the name to this day. Grants were given and mapped, and small farmsteads or timbering camps established, from the eastern edge of the St. Johns to the Indian River and all along the coast. The watery highways connected them to the sawmills of Palm Coast and the administrative center in St. Augustine in a landscape where long-trodden footpaths and an ill-developed road system still could not accommodate wagons.

Britain's Colonial Experience

The grand aspirations of the would-be planters usually fell short of reality. British colonists from the lower classes often abandoned the harsh environment of the organized plantation, struck out on their own, intermarried into Native society, accepted more lucrative plantation contracts in more developed areas, or fled to a larger city to apply their labors for their own profit.

The whining tones of East Florida planter Denys Rolle's 1765 "Humble Petition" exemplify the experience of the majority of British grantees, slowly amalgamating tracts and pushing through repeated false starts and failures until they could petition the government for something more lucrative later on, provided their finances could survive the ordeal. In Rolle's case, Parliament awarded him compensation for losses at his plantation along the St. Johns after the Revolutionary War and granted him islands in the Bahamas.

The experience of the Minorcan and Italian settlers under the harsh thumb of Andrew Turnbull offers

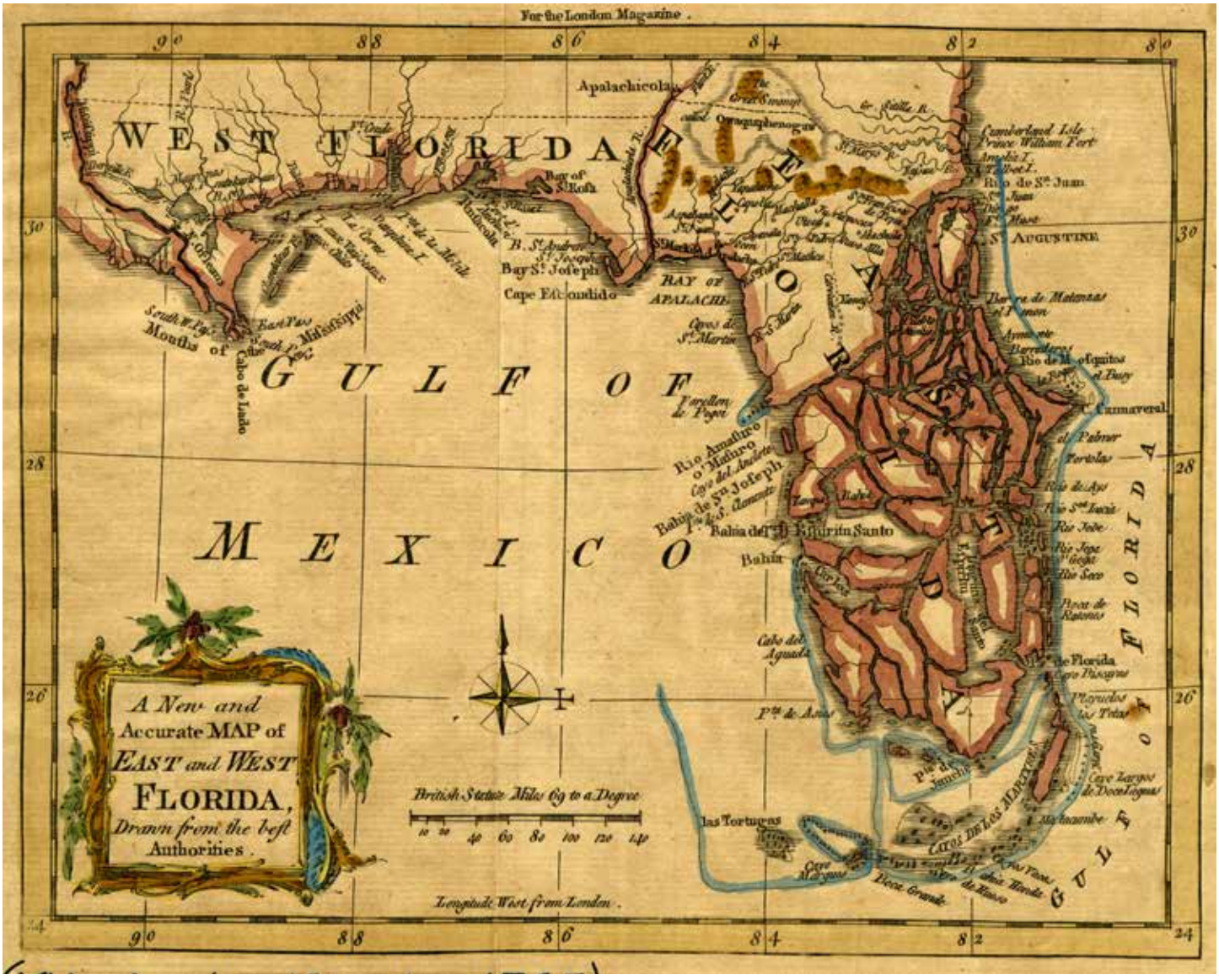
the largest and best example of a "successful" East Florida plantation, but one that ended in tragedy. Florida's unpredictable weather and the slave-like conditions of the indenture system took their toll on Turnbull's 1,250 Mediterranean colonists, until some survivors marched to St. Augustine and forced the government to intervene and terminate their contracts during the upheaval of the Revolutionary War.

Loyal to the Crown

East and West Florida remained loyal to the British crown during that war, from 1775 to 1783. The two colonies were invited to send delegates to the Continental Congress but declined. The Caribbean as a block was more profitable and more proximal to British interests, more reliant on British ships and supplies, and therefore easier to control. British efforts to develop the Florida colonies in the Caribbean style paid off. But even as the war erupted, the would-be United States set its sights on Florida and Quebec as targets for conquest, fearing they would be launching points for British military campaigns to pincer the colonies back into submission.

In this way, the founding fathers always intended for Florida to become part of the United States, even if its inhabitants didn't want to be. George Washington in particular saw Florida as an essential acquisition, noting its command of sea routes in the Gulf of Mexico and the Atlantic and the likelihood of hostile incursion on the continent from foreign armies and Indian-allied forces. He authorized five invasions of Florida throughout the Revolutionary War, but only the Spanish siege of Pensacola was a military success.

Overall, Spain aided the cause of the 13 rebelling colonies reluctantly, an ally only by proxy with France, holding onto its Bourbon grudge against Britain from 20 years before. What actions Spain took to aid the rebellion were made largely for its own self-interest. It trusted its new Anglo-American neighbor little more than it trusted its enemies, and for good reason. For a century, Spanish governors had watched the land-hungry settlers push boundaries



State Archives of Florida

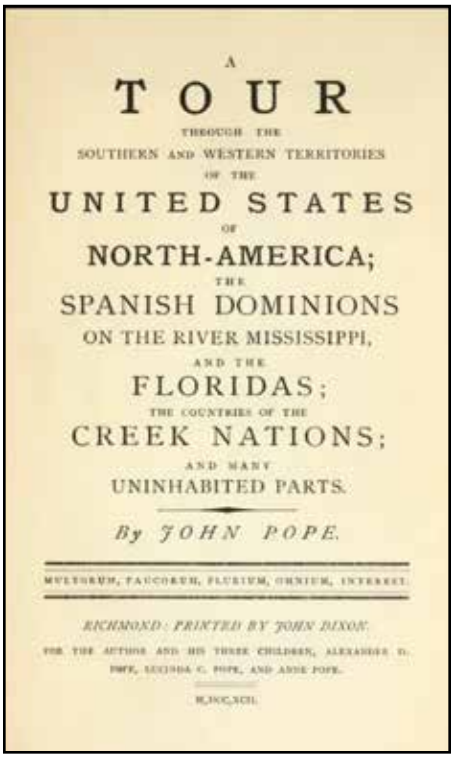
Map of East and West Florida from 1765 shows the British colonies established after the 1763 Treaty of Paris. Separated by the Apalachicola River, East Florida (capital, St. Augustine) covered the peninsula, while West Florida (capital, Pensacola) extended to the Mississippi River.

farther to the west, north, and south in violation of their own treaties and proclamations. Many Georgians fighting now for independence were only one generation removed – if that – from the forces that had laid siege to St. Augustine in 1740. Regardless of the victor, Spain knew what was coming. It regained the Floridas in 1783, as part of the treaty that concluded the Revolution.

Florida and the New Nation

When Britain, Spain, and France nearly went to war again in the tumultuous years of 1790 through 1792, President George Washington pushed for neutrality but also did little to stop territories like Kentucky (which would become a state in 1792) from forming militia units to prepare for conflict. During this time, the United States developed a playbook that would serve it repeatedly as it expanded across the continent: sneak settlers into territories outside the official claims of the United States (often as organized militia units), seize or establish a fortification, declare an independent republic, and petition the U.S. for recognition and acceptance. A former soldier named John Pope traveled into Louisiana and Florida during this time frame, sketching forts and feeding intelligence to those militia units while he wrote his 1792 travelogue, *A Tour through the Southern and Western Territories.* Years later, it would become an invaluable resource for historians.

The attempt to send Kentuckian soldiers down to seize power and "declare independence" was thwarted by Spain's Native allies, who warned the Spanish about the threat. This only delayed the inevitable, and armed revolts, invasions, and attempted annexations in the Floridas occurred in 1810, 1812, 1816, and 1817 before the United States successfully pressured Spain into selling the territory in 1819. George Washington's fears about Britain using Florida as a base of operations for reinvasion of the United States would be realized during the War of 1812, when the British and their allied Creek and Seminole forces used Florida as a base of operations and a place for safe retreat when raising the United States. The British built several forts in the Spanish territory, and even gave them to their allies at the conclusion of the war in 1816, most famously the "Negro Fort" at Apalachicola. Andrew Jackson's bombardment of it in 1816 would lead to the First Seminole War.


A
TOUR
THROUGH THE
SOUTHERN AND WESTERN TERRITORIES
OF THE
UNITED STATES
OF
NORTH-AMERICA;
THE
SPANISH DOMINIONS
ON THE RIVER MISSISSIPPI,
AND THE
FLORIDAS;
THE COUNTRIES OF THE
CREEK NATIONS;
AND MANY
UNINHABITED PARTS.
By JOHN POPE.
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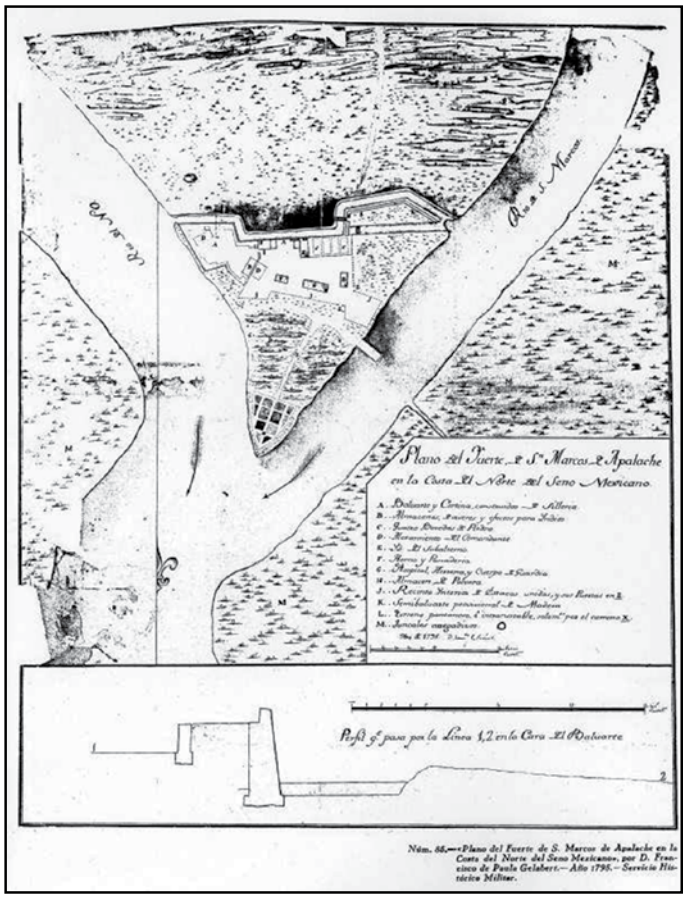
RICHMOND: PRINTED BY JOHN DIXON.
FOR THE AUTHOR AND HIS THREE CHILDREN, ALEXANDER D. POPE, SECUNDA C. POPE, AND ANNE POPE.
M,DCC,XCII.

John Pope's early American travelogue, published in 1792, details a journey through the southern United States and the Floridas.



State Archives of Florida

Map of Spain's San Marcos de Apalache, attacked by Gen. Andrew Jackson in 1818.

Florida Schemes and Dreams

Founding fathers other than Washington wrote about Florida, and even came up with schemes to annex it. The founders saw Florida as necessary for national security, for trade, and for expansionist settlement. This view prefigured the idea of Manifest Destiny, a word not coined until the mid-19th century, which saw the United States as divinely preordained to expand across the whole of the North American continent. James Madison attempted to supersede congressional authority in 1810 after the revolt in West Florida declared a "republic" in territory east of the Mississippi and north of New Orleans. Madison ordered the territory's annexation by proclamation while Congress was out of session, setting a precedent that Congress later upheld, even funding an additional attack on East Florida with support of the U.S. Navy at Fernandina, Amelia Island, and St. Augustine. The scheme fell apart after slow progress prompted intense scrutiny by opposing forces in the nation's capital and a prolonged international outcry by the Spanish, which prompted Madison to withdraw his support for the operation.

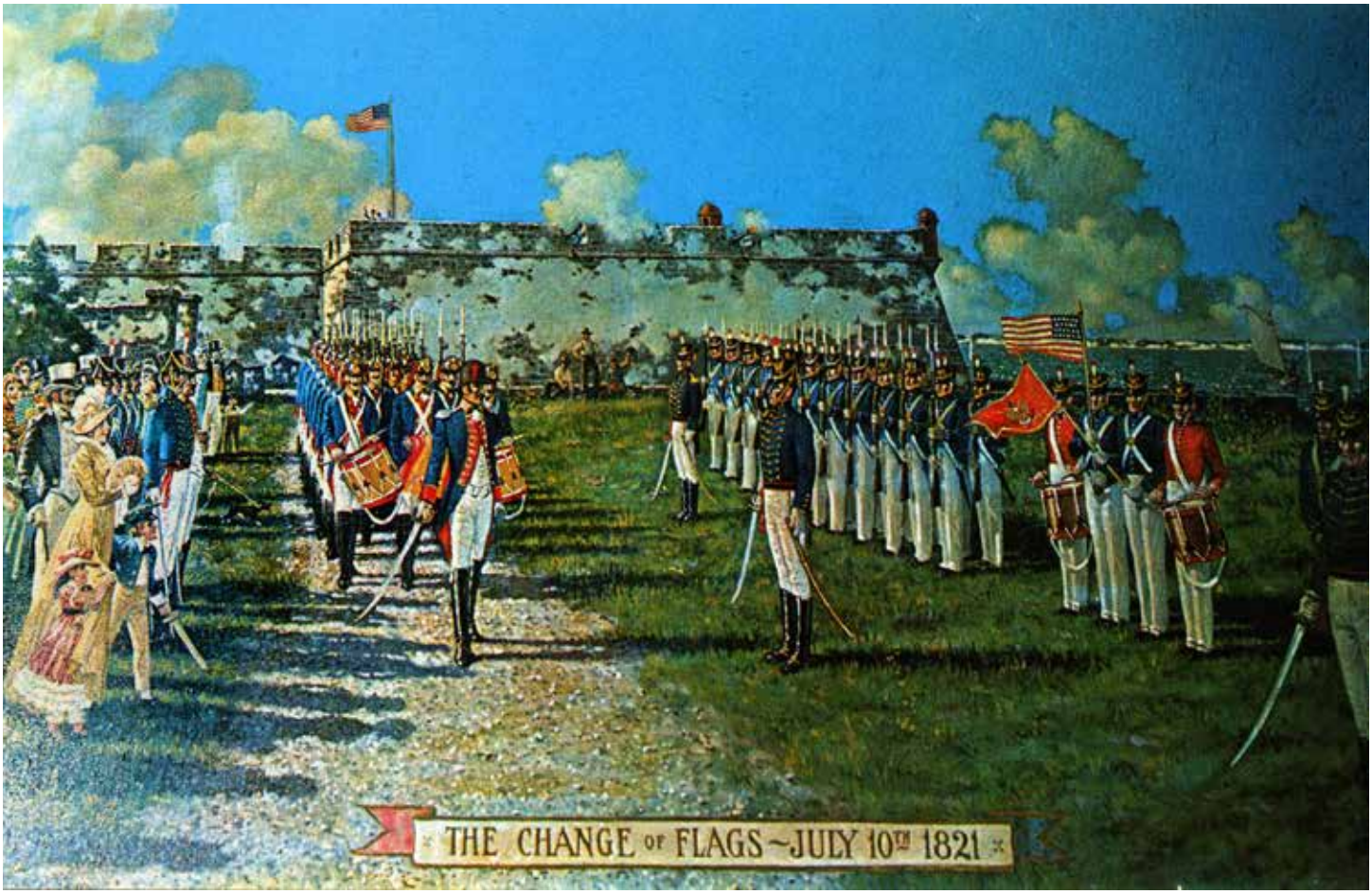
One of the founders, Alexander Hamilton, was born in the Caribbean and spent part of this childhood there

and identified more with subtropical Florida than many of his compatriots. Hamilton saw Florida as essential to the United States for trade, and he wrote consistently about the need for its acquisition from Spain, whether through purchase, treaty, or conquest, so that the U.S. could more easily access the rich markets of his home region. He also insisted that it never revert back to the British authority, still considered a real danger if the powers went to war again: estimates from the period guessed that Spain had fewer than 300 soldiers in the whole of the eastern territory.

Thomas Jefferson likewise saw Florida as an American birthright. At the behest of Hamilton, he tried unsuccessfully to badger Spain into including it in the Louisiana Purchase. Spain and France signed the Treaty of San Lorenzo in 1795 to settle the boundary between the two, but the secret Treaty of San Ildefonso in 1800 muddied the waters. Spain was authorized to manage French Louisiana, and France promised it would trade the territory for Spanish-held Tuscany. When Napoleon Bonaparte sold Louisiana to the United States instead, Jefferson tried to push the boundaries of the territory as far as they could go, only narrowly avoiding an outbreak of war over the dispute. James Monroe, the last living founding father, was intimately involved in James Madison's annexation schemes as secretary of state. He finally oversaw Florida's inclusion as a U.S. territory during his presidency with the 1821 implementation of the pivotal Adams-Onis Treaty of 1819.

In spite of Britain's relatively short-lived administration of the Floridas, the United States territory that emerged in the aftermath of the Adams-Onis Treaty was decidedly British and followed the Anglo-American inspired model of the land-grant plantation. The United States upheld the land-grant system, and the plantation settlements that slowly percolated down the peninsula finally achieved economic success under the system of chattel slavery as practiced in the American South – that is, echoing Turnbull's Smyrna colony, planters could finally turn a reliable profit but only at the expense of human freedom. Cotton, tobacco, sugarcane, and cattle began flowing northward and filling the pockets of American investors. Settlers who could not break into the upper echelons of society in states farther north could bring their resources down to Florida and create their own upper-crust life here. And the inexorable march of land-hungry settlers crept into Seminole-reserved territories until Indian wars once again raged across its landscape. Ironically, the long-held vision of British Florida finally came to pass under American governance. ■

The change of flags, July 10, 1821, at Castillo de San Marcos in St. Augustine, Florida.



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HISTORIC HAPPENINGS

HISTORY & CHILL

We were pleased to be a venue partner for last year's Downtown Employee Appreciation Week presented by Downtown Orlando Partnership and Downtown Development Board. Visitors were treated to ice cream!

HISTORY AFTER DARK

The Halloween Edition of History After Dark featured an evening of immersive storytelling, interactive activities, and unforgettable encounters, allowing hands-on experiences with artifacts and games throughout the museum.

JONESTOWN'S SILENT REMEMBRANCE

On June 15, 2025, UCF graduate researcher Sarah Boye presented "Jonestown's Silent Remembrance – Uncovering the Legacy of Orlando's First African American Community," as part of our Brechner Speaker Series. Boye revealed the enduring legacy of Orlando's first African American community.

SMITHSONIAN'S DEMOCRACY IN DIALOGUE

We were accepted as a facilitator for the Smithsonian's Democracy in Dialogue Virtual Exchange Program. As part of the program, we formed our inaugural Teen Council whose members help design student exhibitions, plan activities, and work virtually with other teens from museums nationwide.

UNITED ARTS OF CENTRAL FLORIDA

We are thrilled to have the support of United Arts of Central Florida to help us preserve local history and share it with our community. This grant helps support essential operations and upcoming exhibits that connect residents and visitors to the stories that shape Central Florida..

ANIMATIONLAND FIRST LOOK

History Center Members were treated to a first look at our latest special exhibition, *Animationland,* and its companion exhibit, *Drawing Magic: Walt Disney Feature Animation Florida*, on Jan. 16. The evening included a performance by Central Florida Community Arts.

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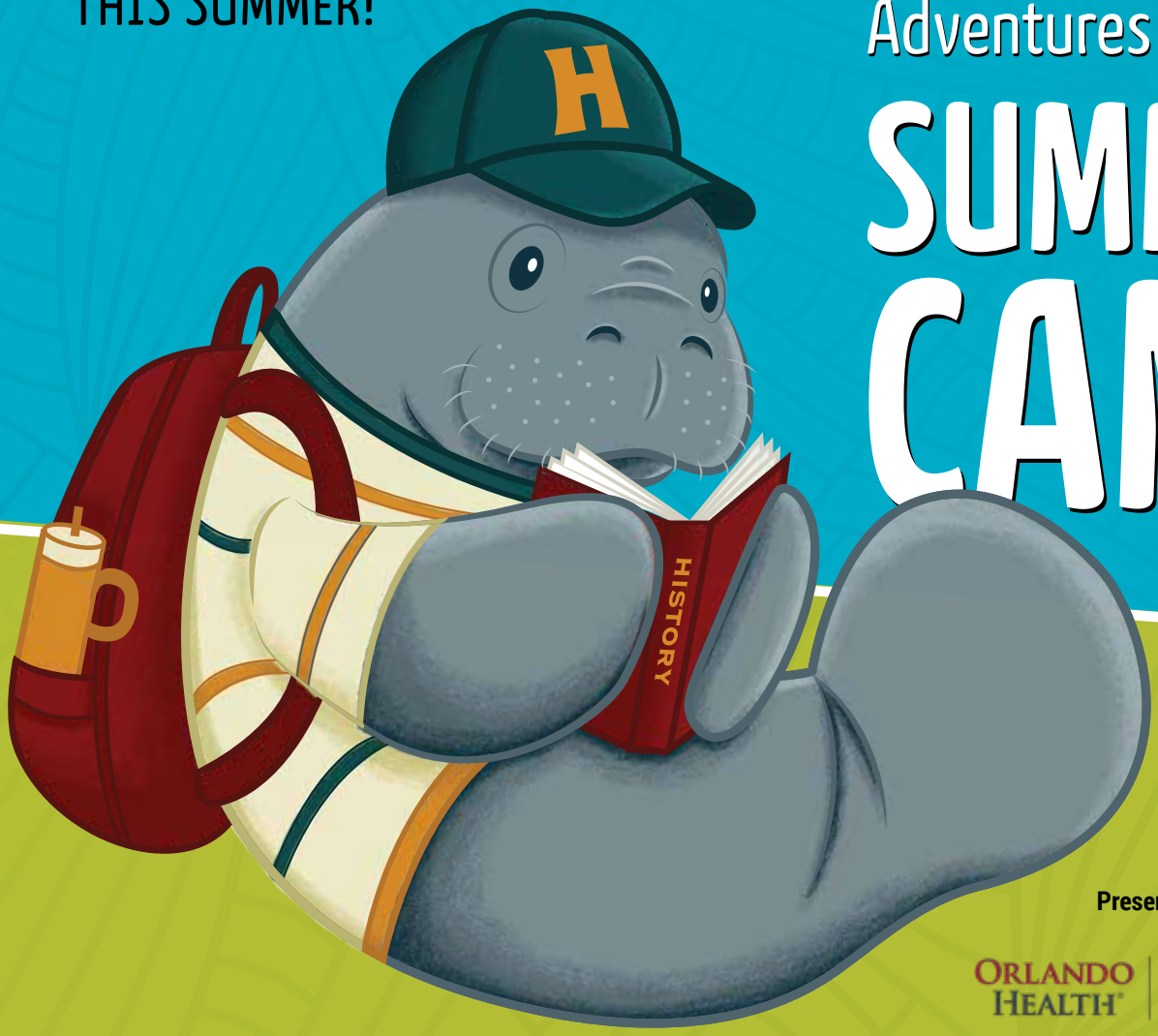

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