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# CURRENTS

magazine

VOLUME 19 ISSUE 2  
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## Painting The Town

Wildlife murals add  
vibrance to White Springs

**Benny Burns**  
teenage singer  
aims for career

**Allison Johnson**  
sowing seeds in  
Suwannee County

**Thomas Fillhaw**  
overcomes hardship  
to restore memories





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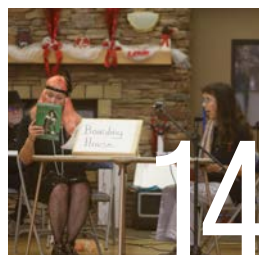
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## COVER STORY



**On The Cover:** Scott and Julie Gay, Carol Stob and Don and Ann Wilson stand in front of the 'Gateway to White Springs: A Natural Haven' mural on the side of Suwannee Hardware in White Springs. The mural is one of three in town — also on the side of the old fire station and the side of Bud's Suds Coin Laundry — as part of the Florida Wildlife Corridor Foundation's murals project.



# Letter

## From the Editor

### Invest in yourself, community

Many people around us here in North Florida are making an investment every day in making our community better.

Some of that investment may be visible to others, sometimes it is not. Rather they are taking care of things, beautifying their community or getting things done behind the scenes without any recognition for it.

That investment in their community and making their community better is all the reward they need.

But that investment is necessary by them, and quite frankly more people to keep making North Florida the beautiful, welcoming community that it is.

We're also thankful that we have the opportunity to highlight some of those individuals who are striving to make their homes, businesses, community a better place.

For a few home and business owners in White Springs, their investment in the community has become a vibrant, visible representation of their love for White Springs, the Suwannee River, North Florida and the natural beauty that has attracted them and many of us to this portion of the country and Florida.

Suwannee Hardware, the old fire station and Bud's Suds and Coin Laundry, all of which line Spring Street or U.S. Highway 41, bear some new paint as the result of the work of the White Springs Historical Society, the willingness of the property owners and some funding from the Florida Wildlife Corridor Foundation.

The murals that adorn the sides of these buildings are a beautiful testament to the nature that abounds in our area and the love of the community that Don and Ann Wilson, Scott and Julie Gay and Carol Stob all share.

It's a community effort to shine some positive light on their town, even while it is undergoing some shaky times.

Next door in Suwannee County, Allison Johnson is also trying to shine a positive light and provide a helping hand to her community. She's done such a good job doing exactly that that she has been honored for it, being named the Suwannee County Chamber of Commerce's Citizen of the Year.

While it's an honor Johnson didn't seek out, it's one that is certainly worth it for her efforts through her own bakery as well as helping out the community through

monthly community meals and her efforts through The Faith Project and Kids Feeding Kids Suwannee County.

She said she's just trying to be a good person and teach her kids that it pays off being nice instead of being a mean person.

It's a noble lesson, one that we all have tried to learn and emulate ourselves.

Also shining a positive light and making positive contributions in our community are Benny Burns, Mallory Waugh, the Phoenix Players and Thomas Fillyaw.

They all do that in their own way.

For Burns and the Phoenix Players, that comes through performance. Burns, a teenage singer, has already garnered major attention, going viral on social media through videos of his singing.

For the Phoenix Players, it's showing off that love of the stage, no matter where one is in life as the group provides an artistic outlet for seniors around Lake City and Columbia County.

Waugh is also bringing positive attention to Natural North Florida as Miss Teen Rodeo Florida, the lone rodeo queen from this area. But there is more to Waugh's story than just success, but also an inspiring lesson of determination and refusing to quit to earn her statewide honors.

Determination and not quitting are traits that Fillyaw has been displaying for decades. Despite a childhood accident that eventually caused him to lose his

eyesight, Fillyaw refused to let that slow him down or diminish his positive view of the world. It also hasn't deterred his work as a caner, repairing and renovating old chairs around North Florida.

They all help make our piece of Natural Florida the gem that it is.



**Jamie Wachter**

Jamie Wachter | Editor

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# Going for *It*

Teenager  
Benny Burns  
aiming for  
career as  
entertainer.

BY TONY BRITT

Benny Burns flashes a smile before performing at the Southside Idol competition.

Possessing stage presence, the passion to perform, the willingness to sing or play musical instruments and a tad bit of youthful exuberance, Benny Burns is a young man on a mission as an entertainer.

Even though the local all-around entertainer is only 14 years old, he has years of experience in front of the camera and behind the microphone.

"I love it," he said. "It's like my passion. It fits my main focus and it's what makes me happy right now."

"I started doing shows at Tom Landry Elementary in Texas, yes, when I was 8 years old."

Burns, a Lake City resident, has appeared in commercials,

been featured on TikTok videos, competed in Southside Idol and also sang during the 45th and 46th annual Olustee Festivals. Performing and entertaining has gotten to be a common occurrence for the youngster.

"He was in his first television commercial when he was 9," said Brandy Burns, Benny's mother, noting Benny appeared in a commercial for a barbershop as well as another commercial for a dentist's office.

The exposure and experience Benny gained through the commercials stuck with him and the youngster sought additional exposure.

He auditioned for a role on the Disney Channel show, "Jessie," he's won multiple talent shows, appeared in multiple theatre productions, won a scholarship for a theater camp in Dallas, Texas, once appeared on a television newscast there and has appeared on four newscasts in Florida.

However, Burns is really known for going viral on social media in 2020, his mother said, noting he went viral for singing The Surfaces song, "Sunday Best."



The young Burns also has his own line of merchandise and has brand deals with Tootsie Roll and Little Caesars Pizza.

Burns attends North Florida Arts and Science Academy, a performing arts school in Lake City, where he is a ninth grader. He is shorter than most teens his age as he suffers from a condition known as idiopathic short stature, which causes him to grow slower than the average teenager. He takes growth hormone due to his height.

As an entertainer, Benny Burns is known for singing, playing musical instruments and acting.

Although Burns is a singer, he's also dedicated to becoming an accomplished musician. Benny plays the ukulele, guitar and drums.

"He fluently plays all three," Brandy Burns said.

Benny began playing instruments in 2020 when he started playing the guitar.

"Him and instruments — he's very good at the instruments," Brandy Burns said, noting Benny appears to have a natural talent for learning to play different musical instruments.

Although he's performed in commercials, singing contests and theatrical productions, the young man said right now his favorite method of providing entertainment is with musical instruments.

"I like instruments and music because I want to be a musician when I grow up," he said, noting his favorite instrument is the ukulele.

Burns said having the experience of performing at such a young age has been a benefit that's aided him through the years as a performer.

"I think the experience helps me a lot," he said. "Since I have so much experience, since I was 8, it will help me learn from everything that I've done in the past."

Although Burns has a huge reservoir of events where he's performed in a group, as well as a solo act, he said he prefers to perform as a soloist.

"I like being on the stage by myself," he said.

Benny Burns sings during the 46th Annual Olustee Festival during February. It was the second consecutive year Burns entertained local audiences during the local festival.



"I like being  
on the stage  
by myself.  
No fear. No  
fear at all.  
You have  
to have  
confidence  
when you're  
up on that  
stage."

Burns managed to gain his stage presence at a young age and now uses it as an asset.

"No fear," he said, of how he gained the one characteristic all performers need. "No fear at all. You have to have confidence when you're up on that stage."

Benny Burns has experienced a life that's provided multiple sources of entertainment and he's learned from each aspect of entertaining.

"His life is surrounded around entertainment," Brandy Burns said. "That's his dream to be an entertainer and so, obviously, he's considered a social media influencer. He has a big following on TikTok and Instagram."

Most of Benny's videos have millions of views and his highest-ranking video has nearly 20 million views. He has 250,000 followers on TikTok.

The young Burns was also given an opportunity to speak to regional and state officials about how TikTok impacted his life as a teenager.

"He just spoke about the positive





Benny Burns takes the stage for a performance during the Southside Idol singing competition.

impact it has had on him — how he has been able to grow, influence, and monetize on social media, without it he wouldn't have been able to have the brand deals and the many opportunities that he's had," Brandy Burns said.

She said Benny has always been an entertainer since he was about 3 years old around the family.

"He's never been one who is shy, camera shy and never had stage fright," Brandy Burns said. "He can always just walk in a room, perform and just love it and eat it up."

The Burns family previously lived in Dallas, Texas, and the elementary school the young Burns attended had a theater program where he auditioned and began his entertainment career.

"He's just always been an entertainer — like big time," Brandy Burns said, noting that in 2020, one of Benny's videos took off and they began to push more content as a result of the video's popularity. "That's how he got his brand deals, and was able to have his own merchandise line."

Burns isn't shy about all the social media exposure he's gained through the years and noted the exposure helps him on his journey to becoming a better entertainer.

"It helps me a lot because the more growth I have, it just gives me opportunity," he said.

Benny Burns seems excited about the idea of being a young



Benny Burns poses takes a break from singing to pose for a picture.

"He just spoke about the positive impact it has had on him — how he has been able to grow, influence, and monetize on social media, without it he wouldn't have been able to have the brand deals and the many opportunities that he's had."





up and coming local entertainer and hasn't let pressure and expectations damper his dreams.

With an abundance of knowledge regarding stage presence, entertaining and pleasing a crowd, Burns said he would encourage other young people who possess the passion to perform to follow their dreams.

"Go for it," he said. "I feel like if you want to do something with your life, do it. If you're scared and you don't go for it, honestly, you won't be able to be anything."

"Go for it. I feel like if you want to do something with your life, do it. If you're scared and you don't go for it, honestly, you won't be able to be anything."

Benny Burns taking the stage to perform at the Florida Gateway Fair.



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# FINDING THEIR *Stage*

Phoenix Players marks  
acting group's return

Phoenix Players member Donna Kite (far left) serves as the orator during a performance as Lynn Hodges, Mark Kirby and Liz Damgaard read their scripts.

By TONY BRITT

Performing as an actor can stretch the imagination, mental capacity, goals and achievements for those who want to master the stage.

The Columbia County's Senior Services Lifestyle Enrichment Center recently unveiled a group of individuals who have let their love of performance guide them as a group dedicated to entertaining local audiences.

Dana Phillips, Columbia Senior Services Activities/Volunteer director, said the Phoenix Players is a new group for the Lifestyle Enrichment Center, but one whose roots are connected to a former group that was founded at the facility.

"It's made up of seniors. They've been back together for a few months," she said. "We had a group, The Geri Actors, back before covid hit. We had looked for someone ever since when we started coming back to lead the group and Harry Joiner, who has taught English, some drama, graciously decided to take the group over. It's growing a little bit."

The Phoenix Players, which has been together for about five

months, held its inaugural performance this spring, quickly followed by a performance in Hamilton County at a senior care center in Jasper.

"They did a lot of their performance by memory this time, but they allow using the script," Phillips said. "It takes the pressure off where they don't have to memorize it.... It's gaining momentum, so we've got something else to offer."

Phillips said the name, Phoenix Players, is symbolic within itself.

"I think they came up with the Phoenix Players because it was almost out of the ashes," she said. "The old group was gone and we're coming out with a new group. It's been good."

Current Phoenix Player members are Donna Kite, Liz Damgaard, Lynn Hodges, Penelope Bellamy, Mark Kirby, Vickie Griffis and Joiner serves as the group's director, sound man and voice extra.

The group is attempting to enroll more members, especially male performers.





Liz Damgaard dances while portraying the character 'Maize' during a recent performance for the Phoenix Players at the Columbia County Senior Services Lifestyle Enrichment Center.



Liz Damgaard (from left) and Vickie Griffis, members of the Phoenix Players, act out a scene as Harry Joiner (left background), the director of the group, works as the sound technician for performance.

"They've done good. They've been faithful at it," Phillips said.

Joiner, the group's director, said the members came up with the Phoenix Players name.

He said the group of performers in the Phoenix Players is different from high school drama students because he doesn't have to be in command of everything.

"Now, with this group, it really is a collaborative effort," he said. "Everything really happens through discussion."

The first performance was a production of an old-time radio show, featuring sound effects, artists, an orator and interactions from the audience.

"It's fun for the actors to develop a character, but when they get in front of the audience it really pulls them," Joiner said. "I could hear in their voices and in their attitudes with one another that the audience made a difference for them. When we performed again at the senior citizen place in Jasper, it even made more of

an impact. It really stretched them forward because the audience made a real difference for them and their effort. I could hear it in their voices. I could see it in their mannerisms, that audience really made a difference. That just amplified the fun in doing it for them."

Joiner said the group operates with a set of three primary goals, revolving around being entertaining and having fun; allowing members the space to stretch and grow; as well as being a good representation for the Lifestyle Enrichment Center.

Joiner said the Phoenix Players want to have fun during their performances and grow as performers as well as recruiting more people to fortify the number of members.

"One of the things is we have

"It really stretched them forward because the audience made a real difference for them and their effort. I could hear it in their voices. I could see it in their mannerisms, that audience really made a difference. That just amplified the fun in doing it for them."

determined, because this has to be fun for us, that we are never going to be script-free," he said. "We are not going to put the thing on us so we have to memorize 20 pages of script, because that would just not be fun. We're going to have the script available continuously because it would not be fun to be under the stress of having to memorize all that dialog.

"I'm really more of a facilitator than I



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Mark Kirby (from left) and Liz Damgaard read their scripts during a performance by the Phoenix Players.

am a commander. The people who are involved are people who have a wide range of experience, talents and gifts. I feel like my real job is to facilitate that so they can come in and develop what they want to develop, grow the way they want to grow, and use their life experience to help develop the characters.”

Joiner said he believes by being a facilitator he helps members of the Phoenix Players engage their own gifts and talents where he and they are able to respect their own gifts and talents.

“To me, I think it would add to the fun of the event,” he said, adding it’s important to have the group performing.

“I think the audience really makes the difference, it really does. I saw this with my students in high school. They would perform and every time they would perform in front of an audience, it really made them increasingly better and really energized them toward what they were doing. It’s the same now, with this group — as they have performed in front of an audience, it really energized them toward what they were doing. It really made it more alive for them and I think really called them to even be increasingly better for the audience.”

Phillips said the Lifestyle Enrichment Center’s clientele enjoyed viewing the group’s inaugural performance.

“It was packed,” she said. “We kept pulling more chairs out for people to sit in. This time, there were a lot of family members of cast members that came to support it, so it turned out really, really well.”

She noted the group has learned to “play to the

“The people who are involved are people who have a wide range of experience, talents and gifts. I feel like my real job is to facilitate that so they can come in and develop what they want to develop, grow the way they want to grow, and use their life experience to help develop the characters.”

crowd.”

“It’s one thing to do it the way they rehearsed it, but when they got in front of people, they did an even better job ... It was just something different. We hadn’t done it in so long. I think when some of the ones see how much fun they (Phoenix Players) have doing it we’ll get some more





Penelope Bellamy (from left) looks out to the audience as Liz Damgaard reads her lines of dialogue during a Phoenix Players performance.



Phoenix Players performers study their scripts during a recent performance. The group, which organized a less than a year ago, has entertained local audiences at recent performances in Columbia and Hamilton counties.

members for that group.”

Phillips said the group’s performance shows seniors have more options available as activities to enrich their lives.

“Here, where most everybody is over 60, they see they can still be active doing some things,” she said. “Any kind of entertainment, this group appreciates doing it. A lot of them, this is their main source for getting out of the house during the week.

“I don’t think there’s anything else like this in town. You don’t have to be over 60 to participate. It’s almost like a club. It gives them some kind of purpose of coming together and working... They put a lot of time into it. We’re glad they’re back.”

The Phoenix Players next performance will be a full length play that’s a dinner theater murder/mystery production, called *The Malted Falcon*, which is about a chocolate sculpture, with the

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Phoenix Player members Mark Kirby (from left), Lynn Hodges, Vickie Griffis, Liz Damgaard and Penelope Bellamy prepare to take a bow after a recent performance.

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lead character of Sam Club, rather than Sam Spade.

"There's a lot of tongue and cheek humor and play off of these real murder mysteries," Joiner said. "It's just more fun and joking, but it gives the people a chance to put together some real character work. Even though it's fun and meant to be funny, it gives them a chance to develop and stretch themselves more... The play is one of those kinds of things that's just really fun for people who are doing it and fun for the audience."

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Allison Johnson (second from left) and her husband, Devan (left), help deliver goods for Operation Blessing in North Carolina last fall after Hurricane Helene.

# Sowing seeds in COMMUNITY

Allison Johnson giving back to Suwannee County through baking, meals

By JAMIE WACHTER

Allison Johnson never expected to be here. Not close to a decade ago when she was a self-described “difficult teenager” and certainly not six years ago when she was certain she would become a statistic as another teen mom.

But thanks to her village of supporters, there Johnson sat at Camp Weed this spring when she was unexpectedly named the Suwannee County Chamber of Commerce’s Citizen of the Year.

“I still don’t think it’s real because I can think of a million other people who are more deserving,” Johnson said.

Johnson’s path to that moment includes her past. But it also includes moving forward and trying to make an impact and leave a lasting impression on people, especially those closest to her: her children.

“It made me very, very happy that my children recognized that being a good person pays off and it’s so much easier to be a good person than it is to go around being mean to people,”

she said, adding she commonly tells people she is a recovered mean girl because of the trouble she gave her parents when she was a teenager.

“To be able to turn that around and flip the script and not walk in that life I had been living and do better not only for myself but bettering the community while doing it, it’s something I’m proud of and my children get to see us walk in that.”

So how did Johnson flip that script?

For starters, she transferred to Suwannee High School when she was a junior in high school. That’s where she met her now-husband Devan.

After getting pregnant with their oldest son, Johnson moved from Lake City to Live Oak. She began to put down roots in the tight-knit community that she credits for inspiring her to become the person she is today.

“I personally love Live Oak,” she said. “I think we have a beautiful community.”



Johnson said her husband will never leave Suwannee County.

But after the reception she has received and the roots she has planted, Johnson isn't looking to leave her beloved community any time soon either.

That community has rallied around her family and supported their efforts to give back in more ways than one. Those efforts have helped lift up others in the community and across the Southeast.

And a lot of that has come in a really short time.

After getting a bachelor's of business administration degree, Johnson began pursuing her career in Human Resources when her husband, who had been traveling for welding jobs, got a gig closer to home.

That's when he also asked her to consider giving up her job and begin staying at home with their children.

That change led Johnson to start expanding her learning, feeding her curiosity and filling her time.

How do you make pasta, Johnson wondered. So she learned. Same for baking bread.

Turns out, she was pretty good at it.

"I learned how to bake bread and my husband said, 'This

is really good. You really should try to sell this to people. I really think it would sell,'" Johnson recalled.

So she decided to do just that. She began baking and then taking her wares to the twice-monthly farmer's market in Live Oak and the twice-monthly Maker's Market in downtown Lake City.

Through her Daily Bread Bakery and Catering business, she also does charcuterie boards for events and also caters weddings and other parties. She still hits those markets though as well where her bread first made an impact.

Now, though, it's a different treat that brings home the most dough: cinnamon rolls.

They've become her specialty.

"It started with bread and then I started making cinnamon rolls and now everybody goes crazy over them," Johnson said. "It's really, really hard to mess up a cinnamon roll."

But Johnson wasn't just content learning how to bake bread or cinnamon rolls and catering events. She wanted to pass forward that loving, supporting community that she was welcomed into when she came to Suwannee County.

So early last year, that very first week she started baking for her first market, she also told her husband that she wanted to feed people.

"My husband is a man who never tells me no," she said. "Sometimes it's not the best thing but in that time it was the best thing."

Allison Johnson is honored as the Suwannee County Chamber of Commerce Citizen of the Year by President Amanda Jackson (left) and Executive Director Danielle Hampton.



"My husband is a man who never tells me no. Sometimes it's not the best thing but in that time it was the best thing."



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Allison Johnson (second from right) helped set up and organize community meals for the homeless and anybody else in need in Suwannee County.

The proceeds from that first market when she completely sold out of her baked goods turned into the seed money for the first of monthly community meals that Johnson helped organize at various locations around town. The meals, which have taken a few months off, are set to return in April.

On average, Johnson said between 300-400 people are fed each month at that meal.

"You never know who you will encounter from day to day who are struggling and don't know where their next meal is going to come from," she said.

Those meals are part of the other outreach Johnson is performing in Suwannee County through her non-profit The Faith Project and Kids Feeding Kids Suwannee County, an offshoot of the Lake City-based Kids Feeding Kids.

That Columbia County organization is something Johnson has been involved with for years, dating back to her time as a student under John Cole's tutelage.

One of his first students to help with that mission, Johnson has remained engaged with Lit Cole as he has continued to push forward with his dad's goal of providing food for children in the community.

But with two kids and plenty of other items on her plate, it was getting more and more difficult

"You never know who you will encounter from day to day who are struggling and don't know where their next meal is going to come from."





for Johnson to continue to make it to Lake City on a consistent basis to help out the organization.

So she, with Cole's help, decided to create a sister organization, an expansion into Suwannee County.

It has, again, made an impact.

"Expanding into Suwannee County, our support just grew," she said. "I think it's just been beneficial overall to the program and it's been a blessing."

Which isn't surprising to Johnson, who has been witness to the support that comes in the tight-knit community. Support that again

Allison Johnson use the proceeds from her Daily Bread Bakery and Catering business to help fund the community meals that help out those less fortunate in Suwannee County.

Allison Johnson (left), through The Faith Project, helped gather supplies for storm-impacted areas in North Carolina last fall.





surfaced last fall after the devastation Hurricane Helene caused in North Carolina.

The two groups in the neighboring communities teamed up to find a way to help out those impacted there.

Within a matter of days, the groups had raised the money for a trip to take goods to North Carolina, goods that filled two U-Haul trailers and a U-Haul truck.

“Every time we’ve presented a need within the community, it’s been met almost over night,” she said. “It’s nice to be part of something when people see a need and see people hurting, they jump in head first to help. I think that is truthfully what will keep us here for ever. There’s just such a tight-knot community and it’s something I think everybody should get to experience.”

That support was visible again with Johnson’s well-earned award, one she didn’t know was coming and never expected until she was sitting at the Chamber’s annual Gala and began hearing the person’s accomplishments.

When she heard the winner ran a



Cinnamon rolls are Allison Johnson’s top seller through her Daily Bread Bakery and Catering business.

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Allison Johnson started her own business last year because she wanted to learn how to bake bread and make pasta. It was good enough her husband convinced her to sell it.

non-profit and also owned their own bakery, it clicked: they were talking about her.

"I was overwhelmed with gratitude," she said. "I started to cry, but I'm a crier, though. That's not out of the norm for me."

While thankful for the recognition and accomplishment, Johnson said it was completely unnecessary.

Nothing about what she's doing, from the bakery to the community meals to rounding up supplies for people in North Carolina to trying to help feed children in the community, has anything to do with trying to be honored for that work.

Rather, she said, it's an honor to do that work.

"You never do anything to get something in return," she said. "I'm a firm believer that you can sow seeds and whether it's my great-great grandchildren that reap that harvest, it's not something that you ever need to be expecting something in return."

"For me, it's just going and being a good person."

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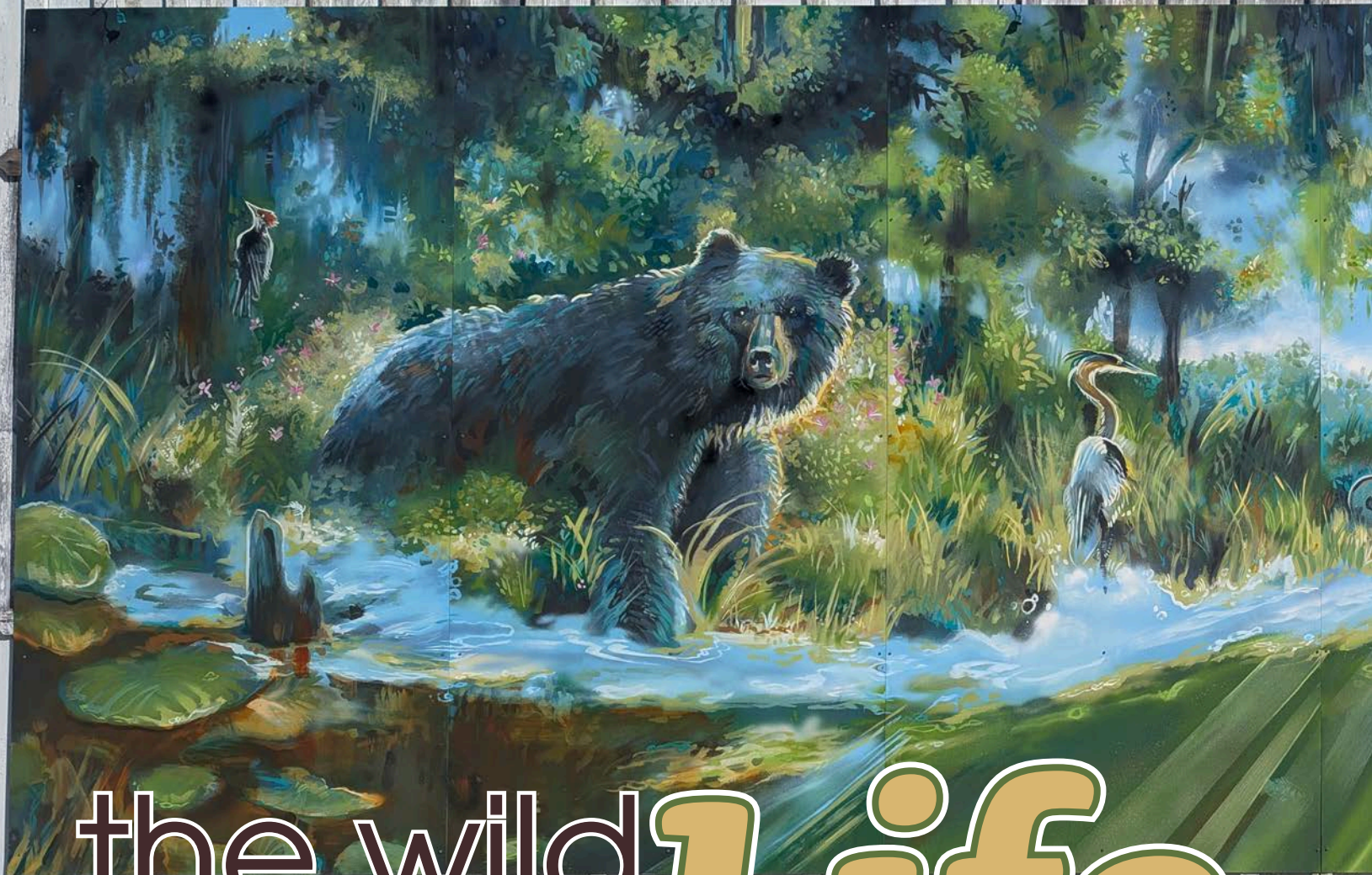
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# the wild art of *Life*

## White Springs welcomes wildlife murals to buildings

By JAMIE WACHTER

Some new wildlife has been seen hanging out in historic White Springs.

Right along U.S. Highway 41 (Spring Street), a black bear, an alligator and a gopher tortoise have taken up residence in the southern Hamilton County town and have brought additional friends with them as well.

And they won't be leaving any time soon.

A collaborative effort between the White Springs Historic Preservation Society, the Florida Wildlife Corridor Foundation and a talented Orlando-area artist have brought the wildlife to life on three buildings in town as part of the foundation's wildlife murals project.

"It's been a really wonderful project," said Sharon Shea, president of the White Springs Historical Society. "I think it's great for the town."

The path to bringing the wildlife murals to White Springs

was as winding as the Suwannee River that the town sits on.

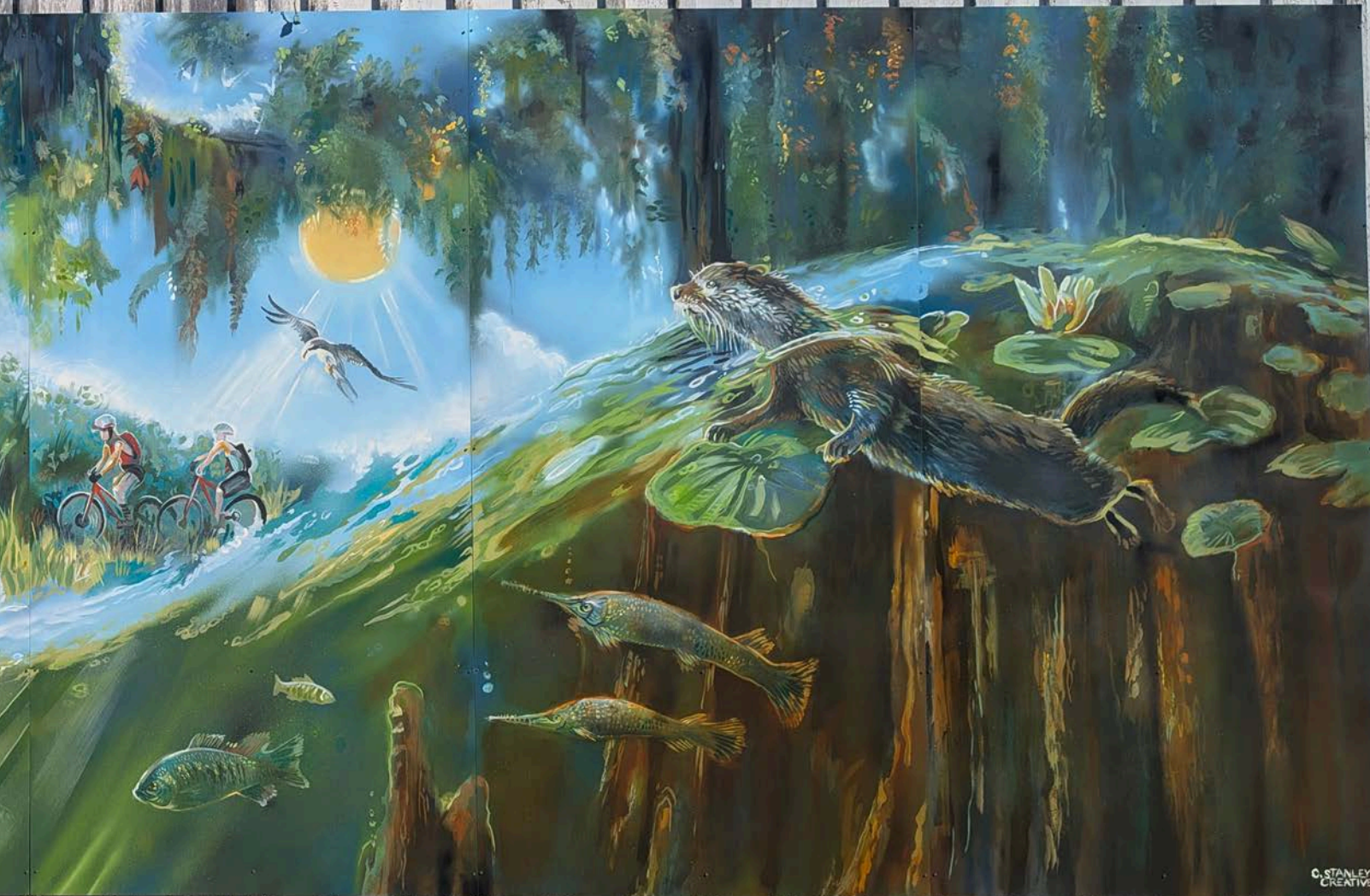
It's a trek that began years ago with a completely different project to help bring additional positive attention to the small town, which is at risk of losing its town charter and government amid financial distress and turmoil.

Several years ago, Shea and Julie Gay began the process of having White Springs designated as a Florida Greenways and Trails Trail Town.

After a few years of working on that project, along with a slight pause in the project, they moved forward near the end of 2023 and obtained the designation. That came after several face-to-face meetings to pitch for White Springs' inclusion.

"We didn't fit quite into what they think as a Florida Greenways and Trails Trail Town," Shea said. "We didn't have any real infrastructure with hotels, motels, places to go out, restaurants. A lot of their Trail Towns are real vibrant and





# Gateway to White Springs: A Natural Haven

This six-panel mural welcomes visitors to White Springs with an inviting portrayal of its natural beauty. The scene unfolds along the serene Suwannee River, framed by native plants that highlight the region's native beauty. Biking trails weave through the lush landscape, inviting exploration. The mural is alive with wildlife: swallow-tailed kites soar overhead, a black bear emerges from the forest, and gar fish glide through the waters. The mural features a cross section of land and water, showcasing life both above and below. The viewer will see the river bank habitat as well as peek under the lily pads and see the cypress knees both above and below the water. Together, these elements create a stunning tableau that celebrates White Springs as a sanctuary for nature lovers and adventurers alike. — **Christian Stanley**





A Hamilton County child helps paint one of the murals under the tutelage of Christian Stanley, the Orlando artist who designed them.



active.

“But we also totally fit the fact that we have trails here.”

As that process came to a successful conclusion and the pair were in Tallahassee to receive that official designation, the seed to chase down wildlife murals took root.

During that visit to the state capital in November 2023, Shea said they were approached by someone with the Wildlife Corridor Foundation, who mentioned the group had started a program of having murals done in cities within the Corridor.

Early last year the White Springs group began seriously considering adding some murals to buildings in the historic part of town.

Folks from the foundation reached out again, looking to continue the conversation that began in Tallahassee.

“They said, ‘yes, we’re having murals installed all over Florida in the Wildlife Corridor. If you’re interested, we’ll tell you more,’” Shea recalled, adding the group then shared additional information about the town to lead into further discussions. Discussions that had a familiar feel following the work on the Trail Town designation.

“That’s how that got started,” she added. “Once again, we had to convince them that even though we didn’t fit in to their little box, that we were viable.”

In fact, the town was more than viable. The Historic Preservation Society was determined. It had begun the process of securing locations — Suwannee Hardware in the historic Adams Country Store building (Gateway to White Springs: A Natural Haven), the former fire station building less than a block away (Florida’s Living Giant) and Bud’s Suds Coin Laundry (Nature’s Rhythm) next to Fat Belly’s further south on U.S. 41 — to do the murals with the goal of utilizing local artists to do the work even if it wasn’t part of the Wildlife Corridor Program.

The White Springs Historical Society held a community day during the mural painting as a form of engagement. Area students helped paint one of the murals that day.







# Florida's Living Giant

This mural celebrates the diverse and vibrant ecosystem of North Florida through the striking image of a giant alligator head, reimagined as a lush, living landmass. The alligator, a keystone species, serves as a foundation for life, with its textured surface transformed into a thriving habitat. Native plants, birds, reptiles, and mammals find shelter and sustenance in the scene. This surreal yet grounded depiction invites viewers to reflect on the interconnectedness of Florida's wildlife, highlighting the importance of preserving its unique natural heritage and is inspired by the song lyrics provided. The windows on this wall require a large central figure so that the artwork will translate and not be blocked or obscured by them. — Stanley

Christian Stanley sketched the outline of the mural on the old fire station building before adding the color that makes the mural vibrant.





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## Nature's Rhythm

This dynamic mural transforms the side of Buds and Suds laundromat into a vibrant journey through Florida's native ecosystems, seamlessly blending the architecture into the design. The three structural pillars become towering trees and lush plant life, creating a natural division into four sections. Each segment showcases a unique native species of Florida, paired with complementary flora, depicted in scenes that transition from dawn to day, dusk, and nightfall.

The top vents are artistically integrated as elements of the environment, such as branches or moss. This piece not only highlights Florida's ecological diversity but also celebrates the beauty of its natural rhythms. Species highlighted include gopher tortoises, bobcat, great horned owl, Sand Hill cranes and more. — **Stanley**

"Didn't even have to think about it," Suwannee Hardware owner Don Wilson said about taking part in the mural project.

Julie Gay, who owns the old fire station with her husband, Scott, said they had discussed putting a mural on the side of the building for years.

"We had all been discussing it," she said even prior to the Foundation coming forward as a possibility.

But in the second meeting with the Foundation came great news for making the plan for the murals become a reality.

After originally just providing support for the murals, now the Foundation was willing to come

forward with \$15,000 toward the project. The Hamilton County Commission contributed a \$5,000 local match and the ball really got rolling.

Once again, the persistence of Shea and the Historic Preservation Society paid off.

Initially, the Foundation intended to just have one mural completed in White Springs. However, discussions with Christian Stanley had already advanced to the point where he had agreed to do three for that cost.

"They found the wisdom in that and they are extremely excited and happy about everything and it's just a wonderful, smooth process," Shea said, adding the town was fortunate to have







The murals on the Bud's Suds Coin Laundry building feature four different scenes of wildlife found in the Florida Wildlife Corridor.

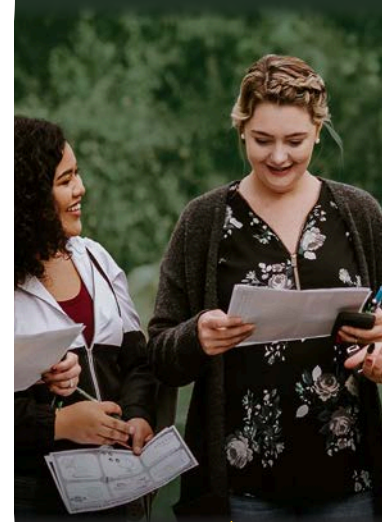


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found Stanley to do the work.

Finding him was necessary as the original goal of having local artists perform the murals didn't meet the strict guidelines as part of the state program. The muralist had to have certain credentials and experience in doing murals.

"We were special," Wilson added. "Normally towns only get one. We got three. We were very pleased."

Still, the town found ways to make the project as local as possible. During the work on the murals in town, a community outreach event was planned in which residents could come out and watch the work being done with children having an opportunity to help paint on the old fire station mural.

Shea added that local artist and teacher Rachel Budwick helped get children there while also being a key role in the feedback process that shaped what the murals ended up looking like.

Settling on the artwork also was a process, Shea said.

For starters, there again were restrictions from the Wildlife Corridor Foundation on what it could include. Namely, the wildlife depicted had to be accurate and found within the corridor.

"It was down to, 'What type of flower is that? No, we don't know that flower. It needs to be another flower,'" Shea said.

Also, the building owners all had their own preferences and desires as well. Some of those wants had been expressed previously when the plan was going to involve local artists. The state restrictions and changes meant "a little bit of control had to be given up," Shea said.

Still, feedback received from the property owners, Budwick or even the state, was willingly accepted and incorporated by Stanley, she noted.

"Every time along the way, the artist was just wonderful," she said, noting he initially sent in black and white sketches along with a written description of what the mural represented.

Those sketches, shaped by feedback, became colored sketches that in turn provided another round or two of feedback before the process was complete.

It all came together to make the project successful. Stanley's written description included with the initial sketches were so well done, Shea said they have been included on the Florida Wildlife Corridor Foundation website.



Volunteers measure one of the panels for the mural on the Suwannee Hardware building. The murals were not painted straight on the building due its age and the wood siding.



Volunteers help hang the mural panels on the side of the Suwannee Hardware building.

The colored sketches as well allowed for some crucial tweaks on some of the finer details.

For instance, one of Stanley's drawings was wonderful and spectacular except for one thing. The water was crystal clear, more like the Ichetucknee River, not the tannic waters of the famed Suwannee River.

"One of the biggest pieces of feedback we had to give right off the bat was, 'Oh, that looks like the Ichetucknee River. Our river is tea colored,'" Shea said. "That was kind of fun. It's pretty but can you make it tea colored."

There was still one other hurdle to overcome to make the murals complete. While Stanley drew and painted the art directly on the concrete walls of the old fire station and Bud's Suds during a two-week stay earlier this year, the wood exterior of the historic Adams store, which opened nearly 160 years ago, posed a different challenge.

One that led to the building itself being left alone.

Instead, Stanley put the murals on aluminum panels that he worked on at his



home and then brought with him to White Springs.

"It was decided to sue aluminum panels on the hardware store because of the age of the building and the wood," Shea said. "The aluminum panels could be taken down. That worked really good."

The entire thing turned out pretty good.

Shea said business owners, even of nearby locations, have been thrilled with the artwork. She said visitors have been stopping to look and take pictures as well.

"They are so beautiful," she said. "We're so lucky we got the artist we did and he agreed to do it. He loves Florida and nature and the springs and different things like that."

While there are no current plans for expanding that project, Shea said she knows there could be avenues for future murals

to come to White Springs as well. In fact, she hopes the murals are just the start of a revitalization for the town that has been decades in the making.

"I can see this town becoming like High Springs with lots of murals and little places here and there," she said. "Once we can get a little more retail here with restaurants and things... but everybody has been saying that for the last 50 years. We're about ready."

One of the mural panels is hung in place on the Suwannee Hardware building.



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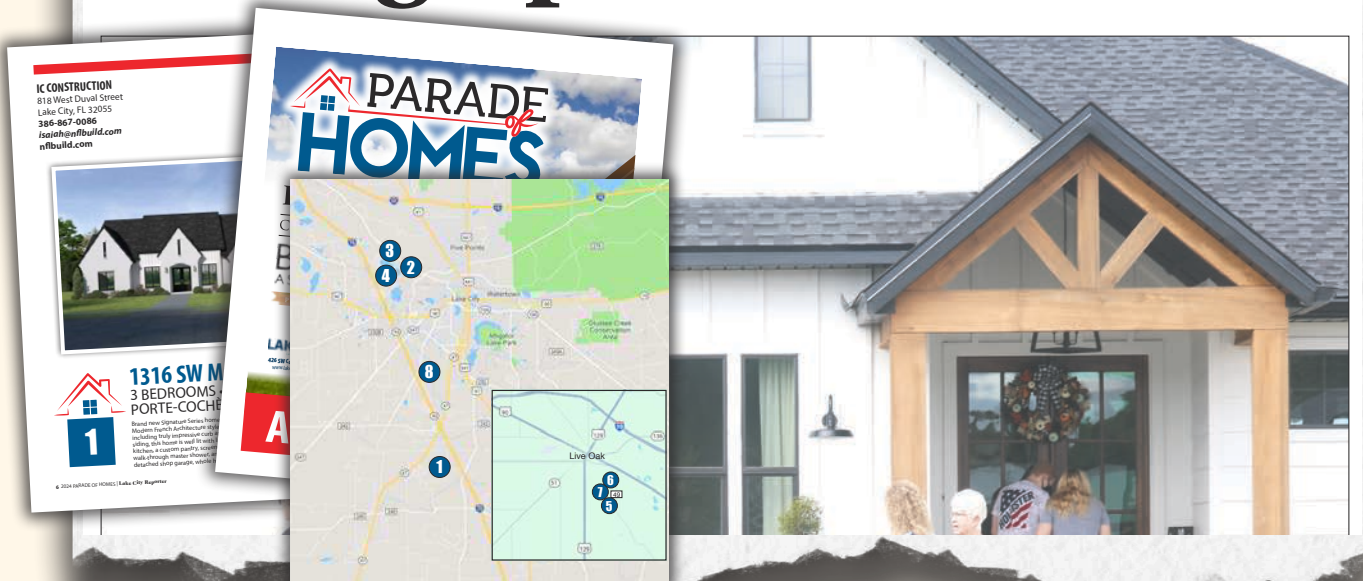
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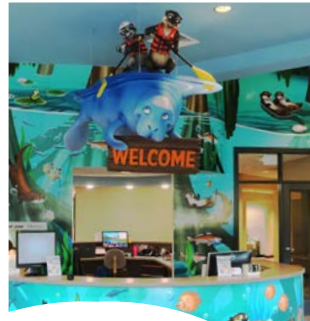
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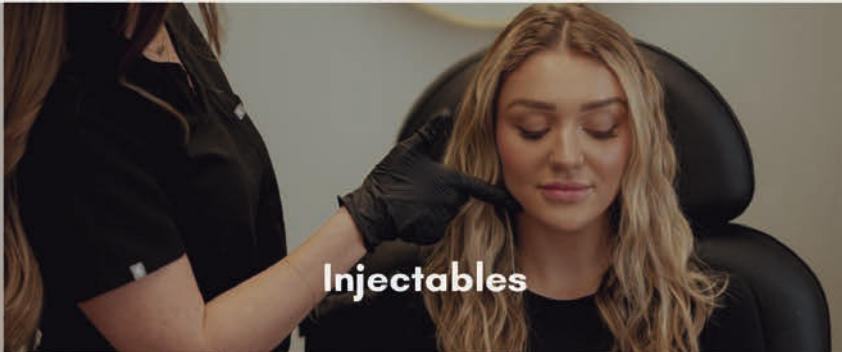


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Thomas Fillyaw feels out a portion of a seat for a porch swing he was working on in March in his home workshop.

# the BLIND CANER

Thomas Fillyaw continuing to restore family memories after decades in the craft

BY MORGAN MCMULLEN

Thomas Fillyaw spends hours in his shed every day. His backyard workshop is modest, roughly 12-by-16 feet, complete with the amenities of a window A/C unit, a pair of oscillating fans and a heater about as old as his work.

The blind 85-year-old craftsman has no need for visual aesthetics. He does have an Amazon Alexa smart speaker he uses to play Merle Haggard and other old-school country along with audiobooks.

The interior walls of Fillyaw's shed are eggshell white, matched in planeness by the shed's aluminum siding. Just a table in the middle of his work space surrounded by boxes of materials and ongoing projects.

"I've got all the comforts of home, you might say," Fillyaw said of his work station. "...It don't take up much room."

Fillyaw's darkened prescription glasses hide kind eyes. He refuses handshakes and only accepts hugs. His constant smile lets you know what's going on upstairs, though you wouldn't

need much insight between his jokes and bubbly personality.

It's about all the advertising Fillyaw needs. Which is great, because the man's outreach efforts extend to his reputation and a simple business card. It contains a single Bible verse ("I can do all things through Christ which stengtheneth me." - Phillippians 4:13) along with a wrong address, a pair of phone numbers and an email address.

In italicized font below his name is the only instance in which Fillyaw even moderately brags on himself, though the claim is warranted: "Master Chair Caning Expert."

For the uninitiated, those unfortunate enough to have never found themselves in Fillyaw's 12-by-16-foot sanctuary, caning is the method of weaving chair seats with rattan cane or rattan peel. Antique rocking chairs, chairs with woven seats and other furniture make their journey from damaged family heirlooms to renewed pieces of history.

It's a trade Fillyaw his practiced practically his entire life,



or at least for the last 76 years. Maybe out of necessity at first, but that has grown into a full-fledged passion and a reputation that extends well past his Lake Butler home.

For Fillyaw, the craft has been well worth learning, even if he can't quite place why.

"I really don't know (why I stuck with it)," he said. "I did other stuff too, and I enjoyed it, but I enjoyed the caning more."

### LOSING HIS SIGHT

Fillyaw remembers colors. He remembers shapes. He remembers the faces of his children. He caught all the important details before 1980. That's about when, Fillyaw said, he completely lost his eyesight, the inevitable result of a childhood accident he suffered when he was about 4 years old.

"My little nephew and I were playing with a little pearl-handled pocket knife," Fillyaw recalls. "Of course, kids don't see danger in anything, and he accidentally stuck me in the eye with it. Things could be worse."

The accident, which occurred in Lake Butler, nearly immediately changed his life. By the time he was 6, Fillyaw said he couldn't see well enough to succeed in public schools. So in September 1948, he officially enrolled in the Florida School for the Deaf and Blind at the age of 9. That's where he first started learning the craft that would



A selection of projects sits in Fillyaw's workshop in Lake Butler.

shape the rest of his life.

"That was one of the things they taught," Fillyaw said. "Industrial arts,' they called it. I picked up on it, started learning it... We were taught how to do caning, make brooms and mops, door mats, mattresses, all kinds of stuff.

"I went through all of that, but I stuck with the caning more than anything else."

Fillyaw can't offer an explanation why he took to caning over the others. He still enjoyed them too, but something

"My little nephew and I were playing with a little pearl-handled pocket knife. Of course, kids don't see danger in anything, and he accidentally stuck me in the eye with it. Things could be worse."



Materials Fillyaw works with in his caning business sit on one of the tables in his backyard shed.





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Thomas Fillyaw's daughter, Millie, points out material on a spool Fillyaw works with for his projects.

about caning stuck with him.

"Caning is different, from one seat to another, or (chair) back, or whatever," Fillyaw said. "You take different designs. There's one that you do from scratch where you have a chair seat that's got holes around it, you have to do that where your weave came through the holes, and there's another one that has that same pattern, but there's a groove around it where the cane is wedged into that groove. There's porch rockers and different things."

It didn't immediately lead to a life as a master caning expert. Fillyaw spent years working for the state of Florida in the food industry for about 35 years. Throughout it all, he kept up his favorite hobby: Helping others where he could. Whether that was in Maine, Tennessee, Texas or anywhere else he's lived, he's been more than happy to help out a family looking to restore its history.

"Hand-caning from scratch I like," he said, "because it's constantly changing. Progressing."

### OVERCOMING OBSTACLES

Fillyaw doesn't believe his blindness is a detriment to his work. He insists, several times over, that he saw all he needed by the time his eyesight was completely lost about 45 years ago.

His work has now just become second nature.

"Even with the sight that I had, I didn't 100% depend on it," Fillyaw said. "I learned how to use a (walking) cane for mobility purposes. In later years, I've had guide dogs, I've had four of them.

"You just learn to deal with what you've got."

It certainly hasn't affected Fillyaw's ability to



Material for a chair sits rolled up on a bench in Fillyaw's workshop.

draw in clients. He says the work is slow sometimes. There just aren't a lot of antique chairs and rockers that people want fixed nowadays.

Still, Fillyaw said it's enough to keep him occupied.

"I get a fair amount (of business)," he said. "I guess sometimes I don't have anything to do, and then there's times that I've got maybe two or three or four chairs out there in the shop."

Fillyaw draws clients from all over the region. Whether it's from Fort Myers, Tampa, Tallahassee, the drives don't seem to deter those who are seeking out a master of a dying craft.

There's usually a common thread among most of his clientele as well.

"You hear different things," Fillyaw said. "Most of it is



sentimental value. Most of the time, it belonged to their grandparents or even great grandparents, and they want to restore it, keep it and pass it down.”

While he spends hours every day in his lab, Fillyaw said the length of time he spends on each piece varies. Sometimes it's a minor patch job, other times he's fully restoring something from just a frame.

“It depends on the size of the chair seat or back, what type of caning you're going to be dealing with,” he said.

“Most everybody that ever brings me something tells me, ‘I'm not in a hurry now.’ I say, ‘Well that's good.’

“Here it is, in the middle of March, I sometimes laugh and tell them, ‘Well, I ought to have it by Thanksgiving.’”

Fillyaw always clarifies he's joking to his clients. He'll have their project back to them, likely, in a couple of weeks,

“It depends on the size of the chair seat or back, what type of caning you're going to be dealing with. Most everybody that ever brings me something tells me, ‘I'm not in a hurry now.’ I say, ‘Well that's good.’”



Thomas Fillyaw shows off some of the materials he works with, including plant and paper fiber used to create chair seats and backs.



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Millie Fillyaw points out the portions of a chair seat that need caning, one of several projects Thomas Fillyaw was working on in March.



A pair of rocking chairs sit on a workbench in Thomas Fillyaw's workshop.

three at the most.

"It's not doing me any good just to sit out there, and it's not doing them any good by it staying here for any period of time."

#### NO SLOWING DOWN

Fillyaw works on all manner of furniture in his shed: swings, rocking chairs, you name it. There are times when clients may lose interest in his services after they've already dropped off their pieces. In those cases, Fillyaw gives the finished products to his kids or grandkids. He certainly doesn't mind either. Even in the mid-March warmth in his workshop, he proudly displays one chair he says is staying with the family.

Fillyaw's generosity extends past the business aspect as well. He's even taught classes on the trade, serving as a teacher in adult education classes at a high school.

Fillyaw said he has no intention of ever stopping his craft. So long as he can hold a sliver of rattan cane, he's all-in. Physical limitations, whether in



the form of blindness, arthritis or simple old age haven't slowed him down yet.

Fillyaw doesn't believe they ever will.

"I've got some arthritis right there in my thumb," he said. "That bothers me a little bit, but not much. It's not affected me as far as my caning anyway."

It helps that Fillyaw is surprisingly spry for his age and condition. The 85-year-old wants the physical and mental challenge of a task he can get to work on.

"God's been good to me," he said. "I've enjoyed life and still do."

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- 1 cup ice cubes
- 3 fluid ounces pineapple juice
- 2 fluid ounces orange juice
- 1 (1.5 fluid ounce) jigger spiced rum
- ½ (1.5 fluid ounce) jigger coconut-flavored rum
- 1 teaspoon grenadine syrup

### Directions

1. Gather all ingredients.
2. Fill a cocktail shaker with ice cubes.
3. Add pineapple juice, orange juice, spiced rum, coconut rum, and grenadine. Shake vigorously and strain into a glass full of ice.
4. Serve and enjoy!

## Key Lime Coconut Margarita

- 3 ounces lite coconut milk
- 1 ½ ounces blanco or silver tequila
- ½ ounce orange liqueur
- ½ ounce fresh squeezed lime juice
- Ice
- Splash of ginger beer or ginger ale

### Garnish

- 1 tablespoon flaky sea salt
- ½ tsp. granulated sugar
- 1 tsp. lime zest
- 1 lime wedge

### Directions

1. Combine the sea salt, sugar and lime zest. Spread the mixture out onto a small plate. Set aside.
2. Run a lime wedge around the rim of a glass to moisten it. Then gently press the moistened rim down into the salt mixture so that it adheres to the glass. Add ice and set aside.
3. Add the coconut milk, tequila, orange liqueur and lime juice into a cocktail shaker filled with ice. Shake vigorously. Then strain into your prepared glass. Top with a splash of ginger beer/ginger ale. Garnish with the lime wedge you used for the rim. Serve immediately.



## Pina Colada Sangria

- 1 bottle White Wine
- 2 cups Pineapple Juice
- 1 cup Coconut Rum
- Add ice and serve

## Mojito

- 1 cup ice cubes
- 3 fluid ounces pineapple juice
- 2 fluid ounces orange juice
- 1 (1.5 fluid ounce) jigger spiced rum
- ½ (1.5 fluid ounce) jigger coconut-flavored rum
- 1 teaspoon grenadine syrup

### Directions

1. Gather all ingredients.
2. Fill a cocktail shaker with ice cubes.
3. Add pineapple juice, orange juice, spiced rum, coconut rum, and grenadine. Shake vigorously and strain into a glass full of ice.
4. Serve and enjoy!



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Fort White's Mallory Waugh was crowned Miss Teen Rodeo Florida last fall.

# A Crowning Success

## Mallory Waugh proudly wears Miss Teen Rodeo Florida title

By JAMIE WACHTER

Heading into the Miss Teen Rodeo Florida pageant last fall, Mallory Waugh had no real expectations. Who could blame her.

The Fort White teen had competed in the Florida Gateway Pro Rodeo pageant in Lake City three times without winning.

So being crowned in a statewide pageant was beyond Waugh's comprehension.

"I kind of had this mindset that I wasn't going to win," Waugh said. "I was like, 'If I can't win the county pageant, I obviously can't win a state pageant.'"

"I didn't hold out much hope because I'd never won anything countywide."

However, a fourth-generation cowgirl, Waugh had conflicting mindsets going into that state pageant.

While there was the doubt that she could win based on her past attempts at the Florida Gateway pageant, Waugh also had a lifetime of lessons learned on the family ranch of giving it everything you've got once you commit to doing something.

So she did, spending the six months in between last spring's pageant in Lake City and the state pageant by studying for the various essays and interview categories that are a part of the process.

"I've been raised in a household where everything that we do, we do it to the very best of our ability no matter if it's the best or not," she said. "I put a lot more into it preparation-wise for sure."

That effort, all the studying, provided Waugh something else going into the state pageant in Ocala: a confidence boost.

"I didn't go in thinking, 'Oh, I'm definitely going to win this,'" she added. "But I definitely had a lot more confidence than I did at the county pageant."

That confidence, that studying paid off.

Waugh not only did her best in the two-day



competition that included countless categories, she proved to be the best.

In addition to winning her first crown, Waugh also won the horsemanship category and the Miss Congeniality category during the pageant for the teen division as well.

Among the other categories that Waugh had to prove her mettle were photogenic, a speech, a written test and interviews on both horsemanship and personality as well as being asked questions on stage that were judged for personality and rodeo knowledge.

"I went to clinics," she said of her preparation last year in between the pageants. "I definitely did all that I could to prepare and do my very best."

"I didn't go in thinking, 'Oh, I'm definitely going to win this. But I definitely had a lot more confidence than I did at the county pageant.'"

Now, Waugh gets to showcase her best by helping celebrate rodeos all across the state, as well as taking part in parades, visiting schools and just providing information about the rodeo.

Waugh's favorite part of her reign was the opportunity to partake in Queens Week in February where other rodeo pageant queens from across the



A fourth-generation cowgirl, Mallory Waugh first got into rodeos three years ago when she competed in the Florida Gateway Pro Rodeo pageant.

country descended on Florida. Staged out of Kissimmee, the week allowed the different title holders a chance to meet, mingle and then enjoy some Florida fun. That included a visit to the Silver Springs Rodeo, the largest rodeo east of the Mississippi River, as well

as airboat riding, hog hunting, eating gator tail and, of course, a trip to the beach.

Still, Waugh mostly enjoyed the chance to make connections.

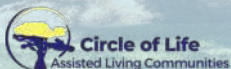
"That was pretty special just to get to meet all the other girls around the



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country who do the same things I do," she said. "But also to introduce them to Florida. It was really special to meet them."

As a fourth-generation cowgirl, Waugh is no stranger to the "horse way of life."

But before seeing an advertisement on Facebook three years ago for the Florida Gateway Pro Rodeo pageant, she hadn't spent much time around the rodeo circuit.

"We kind of grew up doing more cattle work here just around the ranch," she said. "We do a lot of trail riding, checking fences, things like that. That's what I grew up doing."

A member of the Columbia County Riding

Club, Waugh also competed a little bit in some local barrel races and things of that nature.

Still, she said trying her hand at the pageants has definitely increased her knowledge about rodeos in general.

So did all the studying and prep work last year for the state contest.

It's also not something she is ready to move past, either. Rather, she has her sights set on several more pieces of headwear: both locally and on the state level.

"I want to compete for Lake City," she said. "I'd like to win my county pageant."

"I've considered competing for Miss Rodeo

Mallory Waugh (right) is pictured with her sister Miss Rodeo Florida queens and princesses Lacie Stark (from left), Sloan Leonardo and Tessa McCommon.







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Mallory Waugh (left) said she is proud to be the rare Miss Rodeo Florida titleholder from North Florida.

"I definitely carried pride knowing I was from somewhere it's not super common. It definitely has been such a humbling experience. I've been very, very honored to be the one who has held a state title from up here. It's definitely super special."



Florida. I won't be able to do that until I'm 20. But that would be a super unique experience and super fun to do."

Waugh also plans to continue enjoying the cowgirl life as well.

Her parents, Shawn and Jade, moved to Florida around 20 years ago after getting married in Kentucky. Jade's parents followed soon after and the family lives together on 60 acres in southern Columbia County.

Coming from Kentucky, the family's roots in that "horse way of life" run deep. They will continue to do so as well.

"I for sure intend to stick with it for as long as I possibly can," she said.

And while doing that, she also plans to shine a light on the cowboys and cowgirls here in North Florida.

That was another surprise and benefit from winning the state competition. Waugh noted most of the state queens hail from South Florida, not usually coming from Columbia County.

"I definitely carried pride knowing I was from somewhere it's not super common," she said. "It definitely has been such a humbling experience. I've been very, very honored to be the one who has held a state title from up here. It's definitely super special.

"I have so many ties up here in the north and it's been so encouraging to hear how proud everybody is of me, for stepping out of my comfort zone first off and, second of all, to win the state pageant from being up here.

"It's been really good not just for me and my family but for everybody in the horse world up here in this area."



One of Mallory Waugh's favorite things about being Miss Teen Rodeo Florida was Queens Week when sister queens across the country came for a week of Florida activities.

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Mallory Waugh said a lot of preparation, including going to clinics, boosted her confidence for the Miss Rodeo Florida pageant.



In addition to being crowned Miss Teen Rodeo Florida, her first title, Mallory Waugh also won the horsemanship category and the Miss Congeniality category.

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O'Leno, pictured in 1902, was originally settled as an outgrowth of a military camp in the 1800s.

# Pioneer Families

The history of those who settled southeastern Columbia County.

By Christopher Esing

The communities that make up southeastern Columbia County were small settlements centered around a fort, church or crossroads of travel and trade.

Starting with Ellisville, other communities soon followed including Mt. Tabor, Bethlehem, Barrsville, Mikesville, Oleno, Hopeful and Mason City. Each new pioneer pushed back the dirt and laid their roots deep in the Florida sand.

Many settlers were bound together through marriage, faith, exchange, education and work. Through these ties, they forged settlements and identities rooted in the dirt, dust, the hustle and bustle, sorrow, salvation, and celebration that played out upon the land and was etched into the minds and carried in the hearts of those that lived them. Although the physical manifestations of many settlements have long since disappeared, the soil and people hold those memories even

when the wind has blown everything else away.

## ELLISVILLE

Ellisville was the oldest settlement of this region. It was established by Major Giles Underhill Ellis Jr. who moved to the area before 1840. Major Giles Ellis was born in 1809 in Statesboro, Georgia. He moved with his parents to Florida in 1820 arriving in Nassau County.

During the Second Seminole War, Giles enlisted in Smith's Company #1 of Warren's Florida Mounted Militia as a Private. He was mustered in on Sept. 13, 1836, at Fort Gilliland and served until March 15, 1837. He also served as a Corporal in the 6th Regiment of the Florida Militia. Giles was promoted to the rank of Qr. Master Sergeant and eventually Captain.



During his service, he was put in charge of defending much of what became southern Columbia County. He built many forts across the region, including Tustenuggee, Fort Call, Mt. Tabor, Fort Newnansville, Fort Fannin (Fanning Springs), and rebuilt old Fort White. It was said that out of each of the new forts grew a church from its foundations.

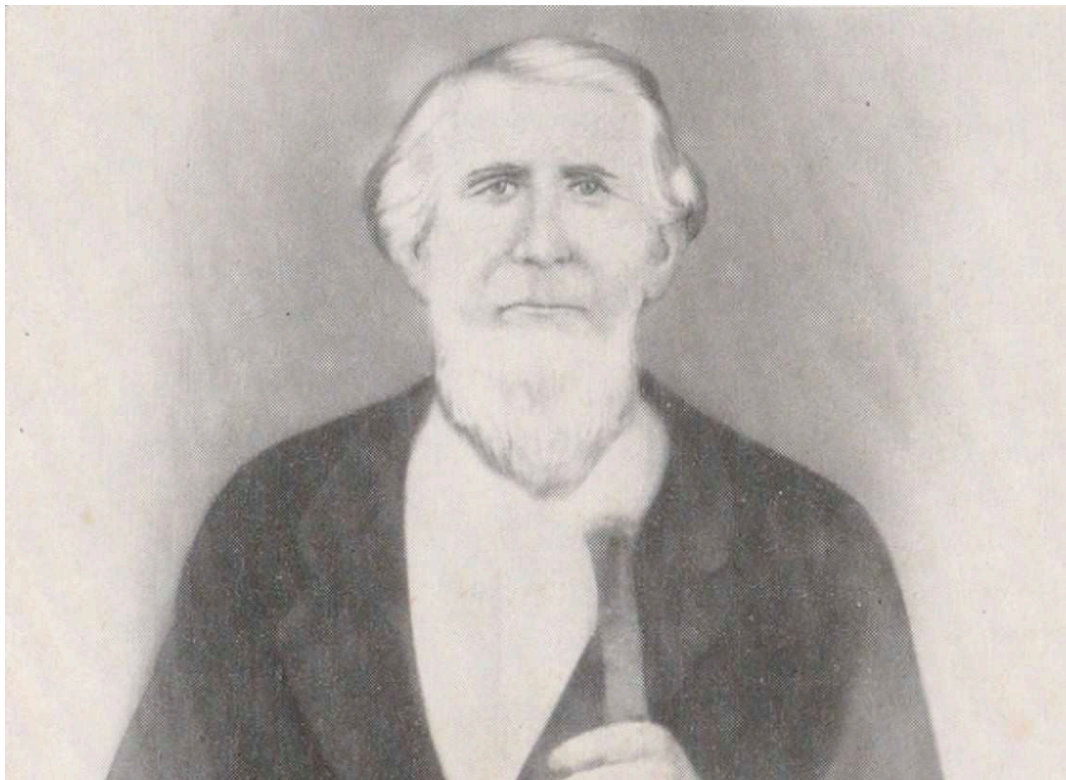
Ellis's fort near his home was one of the commissary stations during the Seminole Wars, and because of his activities, it turned into a safe haven and market center in southern Columbia County.

"Major Ellis also opened a general store, which catered to the surrounding community. Because of his business interest, the area became known as Ellisville."

At the close of the Seminole Wars, Major Ellis moved to Columbia County where he purchased 474 acres of land and established a plantation. He lived in a double pen log cabin, purchased 26 slaves, had 75 vehicles and carriages, and 200 head of cattle by 1848. In 1850, he had expanded to 510 acres and 29 slaves.

Major Ellis also opened a general store, which catered to the surrounding community. Because of his business interest, the area became known as Ellisville.

Giles also became politically active. He served in the state legislature as a Representative from Columbia County for two sessions beginning in 1848 as part of the first General Assembly



Major Giles Underhill Ellis, the namesake of Ellisville.

Legislature of Florida after the state was admitted into the Union on March 3, 1845. Ellis was also a County Commissioner of Columbia County in 1847 and 1862.

During the Civil War, Giles served in the Confederacy with Co. B. of the 9th Regiment of the Florida Infantry.

Following the war, Ellis freed his 63 slaves. One of his slaves was named Ben McNish, who had been purchased from Charleston, S.C., for \$1,000 in gold. Following emancipation, he became the patriarch of the McNish family in southern Columbia County.

Another early prominent family of southern Columbia County was that of Theophilus Weeks Sr. and Ann O'Steen Weeks. Theophilus was born in 1760, in Swansboro, N.C., to Silas and Zillar Hunter Weeks.

Both Silas and Theophilus served in the American Revolution. Silas enlisted in 1777 as a private in Donoho's Company of the 6th North Carolina Regiment. Theophilus also fought with the 6th North Carolina Regiment. Both men likely fought at the battles of Bradywine Creek and Germantown and wintered at Valley Forge.

William Theophilus Weeks would also become a leading politician of the area. He served in the Civil War achieving

the rank of 2nd Lieutenant in Co. F. of the 4th Fl Infantry Regiment in 1861. He was taken as a prisoner of war at Cedar Key and sent to Fort Zachary Taylor in Key West where he was held for six months. He fought at the Battle of Olustee. He would be among those who latter surrendered at Tallahassee on May 10, 1865. Following the War, he served in the Florida State Senate from 1868-1872 and the Florida House of Representatives from 1873-1874.

The Farnells were another prominent family of Ellisville arriving in the 1850s. William and Nancy Jelks Farnell moved with their family to Columbia County from Dooly, Georgia. William was born in 1799 in Onslow County or Jones County in North Carolina. Nancy was born in Pulaski, Georgia, in 1807. When William and Nancy migrated to Florida, Count Pulaski and Henrietta were the only ones living with them.

Count Pulaski Farnell was raised on the Farnell homestead in Ellisville. During the Civil War, he served as part of Capt. H.A. Parramore's Company of Calvary from the State of Florida. He enlisted in April 1863 as part of Co. 1 of the 2nd Florida Cavalry.

At the battle of Olustee, his unit was organized into a brigade by Joseph





The Farnell Farm in Ellisville. The Farnell family was one of the prominent families in southern Columbia County in the 1850s.

Finegan and ordered to advance on Union forces then fall back to protect their flanks. At the close of the war, he hid out in the swamps of Olustee for six months along with two comrades. Plack, as he was also known, worked as a farmer in southern Columbia County. He was later appointed as Sheriff of Columbia County in 1885 serving in that position until 1887.

The Vinzant family were also early pioneers of southeastern Columbia County. John Vinzant Sr. and Nancy Ann Yeomans settled in Florida with their family in 1847. John was born in 1809 in Tattnall County, Georgia. The family moved to Columbia County and began farming by 1850. Several of John's siblings would join them in Columbia County, including Rebecca, Henry, and William Thomas "Buck" Vanzant. The family helped to found what would become Philippi Baptist Church.

John Vinzant Jr. fought in the Civil War. At the age of 20, he enlisted in Company A, 1st Florida Cavalry under Captain Arthur Roberts. He fought with General Kirby Smith in the Tennessee and Kentucky campaigns, becoming 1st Sergeant and with Johnston and Hood up to Murfreesboro where he lost his right leg in battle on Dec. 4, 1864. He was captured and imprisoned in Louisville where he remained until June of 1865 when he was discharged and returned home to Columbia County, walking on crutches. Upon returning, he went to work as a bank cashier.

John and his wife, Mattie, purchased what would later become known as the Vinzant home which currently houses the Lake City and Columbia County Museum in 1880 for the sum of \$450. The family lived in the house for more than 90 years. In 1877, John was appointed Clerk of Court by Governor Drew, and he served in that position for 16 years. In 1897, 1898, and 1905, he also worked as the tax collector.

Charles Fox Martin was another early settler of the Ellisville community. He was born in 1829 in Edgefield, South Carolina. He settled in Columbia County in the early 1850s and married Malvina M. Townsend on Feb. 1, 1855, and settled on a farm in Ellisville. Charles served in the Civil War in Captain Rowe's Company of the 2nd Florida Calvary. After being captured by Union soldiers, he was held until the



The Mount Tabor cemetery is maintained by a special association after church services were discontinued in the community 50 years ago.





Mount Tabor is the second oldest settlement in southeastern Columbia County. The community has had multiple churches after several disasters.



end of the war then walked from Edgefield to Lake City.

The Niblack family also pioneered southern Columbia County. William Niblock/Niblack first came to Florida as part of the failed Patriot War against Spain in 1814 to overthrow the Spanish government. William was born in 1761 in Rowan, N.C. He settled in Georgia and married Devine Diana Tyson in 1798. They had 10 children. William Tyson Niblack came to Columbia County before 1827 and settled in northern Columbia County.

The youngest Niblack son, Silas Leslie Niblack, settled in Alligator/Lake City where he became a lawyer, judge, and served as a U.S. Congressman in 1873 then in the Florida Senate from 1879 to 1881. The Niblack family were prominent farmers in Columbia County before and after the Civil War.

### **MOUNT TABOR**

By the 1850s, more settlers began to put down roots in southeastern Columbia County. With these new arrivals, Mount Tabor emerged as the second oldest settlement in the region. The community was first established by people from Georgia and South Carolina who received land grants and started populating the area in 1851.

Mount Tabor had been a fort built by Giles Ellis along a branch creek for fresh water. The site would later become the home of the Mount Tabor Church and school. By the early 1850s, the population quickly jumped to 50 people. Many of those settlers began to organize for religious services, and in 1854, they gathered at the home of Amon L. Robinson and founded a church. They built a log church and established a cemetery nearby. The Old Mount Tabor cemetery is on Cline Feagle Road two miles from the current Mount Tabor cemetery.

In the late 1860s, the congregation of Mount Tabor agreed to move the church under the pastorate of Rev. Jackson. Forty acres were purchased from John L. Williams on July 9, 1870. Three and six one hundredth acres of land was also given by Mrs. Margeret Cook so the new church could benefit from a spring which was located nearby. Cook also gave a strip of land that intersected her property so that the church had access to the public road.

In 1885, during a revival meeting, some of the young folks were outside when an earthquake struck during service. All the young people were so frightened that they went inside and knelt around the altar to pray except one young man. He was so frightened that he jumped off the stump that he was sitting on and ran the other way believing that the church was going to fall on him. The earthquake's epicenter was in Charleston, S.C.

Another natural disaster befell the church in 1896 when the "Big Storm" leveled the church, and a new church had to be built. Since the road had changed its course,



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the foundation of the new church shifted with the road.

Church services continued until 1974 when regular meetings were discontinued. The cemetery was deeded to the Mount Tabor Cemetery Association for upkeep and maintenance on October 28, 1974.

For much of its history, Mount Tabor had an active congregation that held regular revivals, quarterly meetings, and special days such as children's day. The festivities were marked with big dinners spread on long tables near the church.

### **BETHLEHEM LUTHERAN**

Among the early settlers of Mount Tabor were migrants who were Lutheran and relocated to southeastern Columbia County from Newberry and Edgefield counties in South Carolina. Among those who migrated into the area, eight families helped found the Lutheran church including the Feagles, Witts, Shealys, Koons, Haliwangers, and Snellgroves. Later the Legrones and Bedenbaughs joined following the Civil War.

Of the founding members of Bethlehem Lutheran Church, David and John "Adam" Witt were among the pioneering settlers in 1851. John was born in 1804 and David in 1805 in South Carolina. Originally named Wild, their name was changed to Witt after immigrating.

In the 1850s, David and John were among those in Edgefield who received land grants in Florida. Both brothers' families produced large lineages. Many became prominent farmers, businessmen, and politicians. One of the family sayings was "Everybody in Columbia County



was either a Witt, or a half-Witt" because of the number of familial branches.

David's son, Jacob, became an early leading politician of Mount Tabor. Jacob was a farmer in Columbia County. He lived and farmed in the Mount Tabor/Mason Community. He was politically active, serving as the County Commissioner for District 4 in 1891 and 1893. Among his civic engagements, he was a member of the Masonic Lodge. Jacob was also a devout member of Bethlehem.

Levi Haltiwanger was another founding members of the Lutheran church. He was born in 1819 in Edgefield. He married Melvinia Attaway. The couple had 10 children. They were among the caravan that arrived from South Carolina.

The Snellgroves were also among the settlement expedition of 1851. George Snellgrove was born in 1831. He married Martha Catherine Feagle. They had four children.

William Shealy also settled in Columbia County in 1851 from Prosperity, South Carolina. He was born in 1812. Frederick Hartwell Koon also helped to organize Bethlehem Lutheran Church. He was born in 1821 in Newberry, S.C.



Bethlehem Lutheran Church was founded by a group of lutherans from Pennsylvania who settled in the Mount Tabor area.





The Bethlehem Lutheran Church celebrates its big Easter picnic.

During the Civil War, Frederick served in Company E of the 9th Florida Infantry Regiment. He was a devout member of the Lutheran Church, and even after he moved 14 miles away to Fort White, he attended every service.

In 1858, the South Carolina Synod sent Rev. Chas H. Bernhein and Rev. W.A. Julian as missionaries to Florida. They established headquarters in Ocala. Along the way, they got in touch with the Lutheran families in Columbia County, and Rev. Bernheim began preaching for them and worked to organize a congregation.

For many years during the Civil War and Reconstruction, the church was without a pastor.

Among the families that joined Bethlehem Lutheran following the Civil War were James Littleton Bedenbaugh and John Legrone. James was born in 1834. He was married to Louisa Shealy. They had five children. He moved to Columbia County in 1866. He served in Company H, 3rd South Carolina Infantry.

In 1872, Rev. Simeon Wilson Bedenbaugh of Mason County, Georgia, came to the Lutheran congregation of his own initiative and offered his services. He led the church until his death in 1879. Under his leadership, the church grew and prospered.

The church and parsonage were destroyed in the Big Storm of 1896. Most of the congregation also lost their homes and were left desolate. Congregants met in October laid out plans to rebuild the church. Within eight months, a new

church building was dedicated in July 1897.

Bethlehem served as a meeting spot for many in the surrounding communities with locals coming for Easter services and dinner on the ground, for the 4th of July picnics, as well as political gatherings and speeches.

#### **MOUNT TABOR AROUND THE CIVIL WAR**

Many settlers arrived in Mount Tabor just before or immediately following the Civil War.

One of these early pioneers was George Crawford Mattox, who was born in 1838 in Tattnall County, Georgia. He was the eldest of nine children. The family moved to Columbia County in the 1840s and settled in Benton.

George moved to southern Columbia County and ran a sawmill with his family during the 1850s. During the Civil War, George enlisted in Fernandina with the 2nd Regiment of the Florida Cavalry Company C. on June 6, 1861, and achieved the rank of corporal.

George was a farmer. He was part of the Bethel and Mount Tabor communities. During the 1880s, he ran a Grist Mill and Cotton Gin in Mount Tabor.

George was also politically active having been elected as a Columbia County Commissioner for District 4 in 1883, 1885, 1887 and 1889.

The Tolbert family also settled in Mount Tabor in the early 1860s. Edward E. Tolbert was born in 1860 in Columbia County. He was one of seven children. Daniel moved closer to Lulu, but son, Edward, grew up in southern Columbia



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Silas Leslie Niblack served as a lawyer, judge, a U.S. Congressman and a Florida Senator in the 1800s.



Mount Tabor Methodist Church was among the oldest churches founded in southeastern Columbia County.

County. Edward was a well-known farmer in the Mount Tabor Community and was politically active having served as a County Commissioner for Mt. Tabor in 1911. He was also an active member of the local Woodman of the World.

The Brown family settled in Mount Tabor following the Civil War. Able Bartlett Brown was born in 1841 in Americus, Georgia. He was the eldest of seven children. They moved to Pike County, Alabama, in 1848 and remained through the Civil War. Following the War, they moved to Columbia County in 1870.

Able became a surveyor in Lake City and named several of the streets in the area after friends and family. He was elected as the surveyor in Mount Tabor on October 8, 1877. Able was also a farmer, and he was politically active, serving as the longtime Tax Assessor in the county from 1883 to 1925.

The Robinsons were another prominent family of Mount Tabor, arriving in the 1860s. Lewis Washington Robinson was born in 1846 in South Carolina. He served in the Civil War in the 1st Reserves Infantry having enlisted on August 10, 1864 at Camp Jackson, Florida. Following the war, he moved to Columbia County.

A member of the Robinson family sold land to the Columbia County Board of Public Instruction to serve as a school for the community in 1895.

By the early 1880s, the population of Mount Tabor stood at 325. The area was described as a pine forest with rich farmlands and small lakes bordered with green trees. Soft

stone quarries were said to abound.

Businessmen in Mount Tabor included I.H. Brown who owned a cotton gin and grist mill, G.R. Cook served as a physician, J.H.B. Gunnin owned a sawmill, grist mill and cotton gin, K.D. Edge was a general merchandiser, E.C. Lamb owned a grist mill and cotton gin, G.C. Mattox owned a grist mill and cotton gin, J.L. Niblack was a physician, and W.F. Peeler was also a physician.

Mount Tabor also had a post office beginning in 1877. It was run by Henry English who was born in Lowndes County, Georgia, in 1834. He moved with his family to Columbia County in 1844 where he was raised.

Henry served in the Civil War enlisting with Company B. of the Florida 5th Infantry Regiment on May 14, 1862. Following the War, he returned back to Columbia County where he was a farmer in the Mount Tabor community. Henry was also politically active, serving as a Justice of the Peace for Mount Tabor from November 1877 to 1886. He acted as the Postmaster of Mount Tabor, running the Post Office from his home beginning in the 1880s.

John Barney Edge was one of the leading businessmen of Mount Tabor and Columbia County. He was born in 1845 in Union County, Georgia. John moved with his family to Columbia County in the 1850s where his father was a general merchandiser in Mount Tabor.

In 1882, Barney formed a partnership with Joseph Porter opening the Edge and Porter Store at 20 North Marion St. in



a small wooden storefront known as the Golden Property in Lake City. They later moved to the corner of Marion and Desoto St. where they operated their store from 1882 to 1892. In 1892, they moved into a two-story frame building, but the Panic of 1893 caused the store to go bankrupt.

Barney was active in politics in Lake City serving as a City Alderman on the Lake City Council in 1895.

Because many families in the area had children, they worked to organize a school for the community. Mount Tabor built its own school near the Mount Tabor Methodist Church. The school went by several names including the Adams School and the Mount Tabor School.

“They planed  
an orange  
grove around  
the courthouse  
to attract those  
interested in  
setting up orange  
farms. Many  
places around  
the county  
soon promoted  
citriculture.”

#### CITRICULTURE

By the 1870s and 1880s, Mt. Tabor, Ellisville, and the surrounding areas boomed economically as new settlers arrived in hopes of growing citrus. Others invested in land in anticipation that a railroad would be completed to the area and allow ease of delivery to the market.

Ellisville was said to have the best orange lands of the area. Orange cultivation in Columbia County was boosted heavily during the 1880s. In 1880, there were 436 orange-bearing



Children are pictured outside of the Mount Tabor school.

trees that produced 158,800 oranges worth \$2,741.

In 1881, J.F. Baya, C.R. King, C.A. Finley, and L. Harrison formed the Columbia County Immigration Society to help promote citriculture in the county. They planted an orange grove around the courthouse to attract those interested in setting up orange farms. Many places around the county soon promoted citriculture. Southeastern Columbia County was considered the prime orange growing center for the region.

Citriculture boomed in the county throughout the 80s, and as the oranges were ready for the market, farmers brought their carts laden with the fruit into town. They parked alongside courthouse square and sold their crops to brokers generally for .25 cents per 100. Carts arrived from October through March. Because of the number of farmers who parked to sell their crop, a street developed alongside courthouse square and was named Orange Street because of the trade.

Citrus thrived until the Great Freeze of 1894/1895 when back-to-back freezes destroyed most of the citrus crop in North Florida and pushed orange cultivation into Central and South Florida.

#### BARRSVILLE

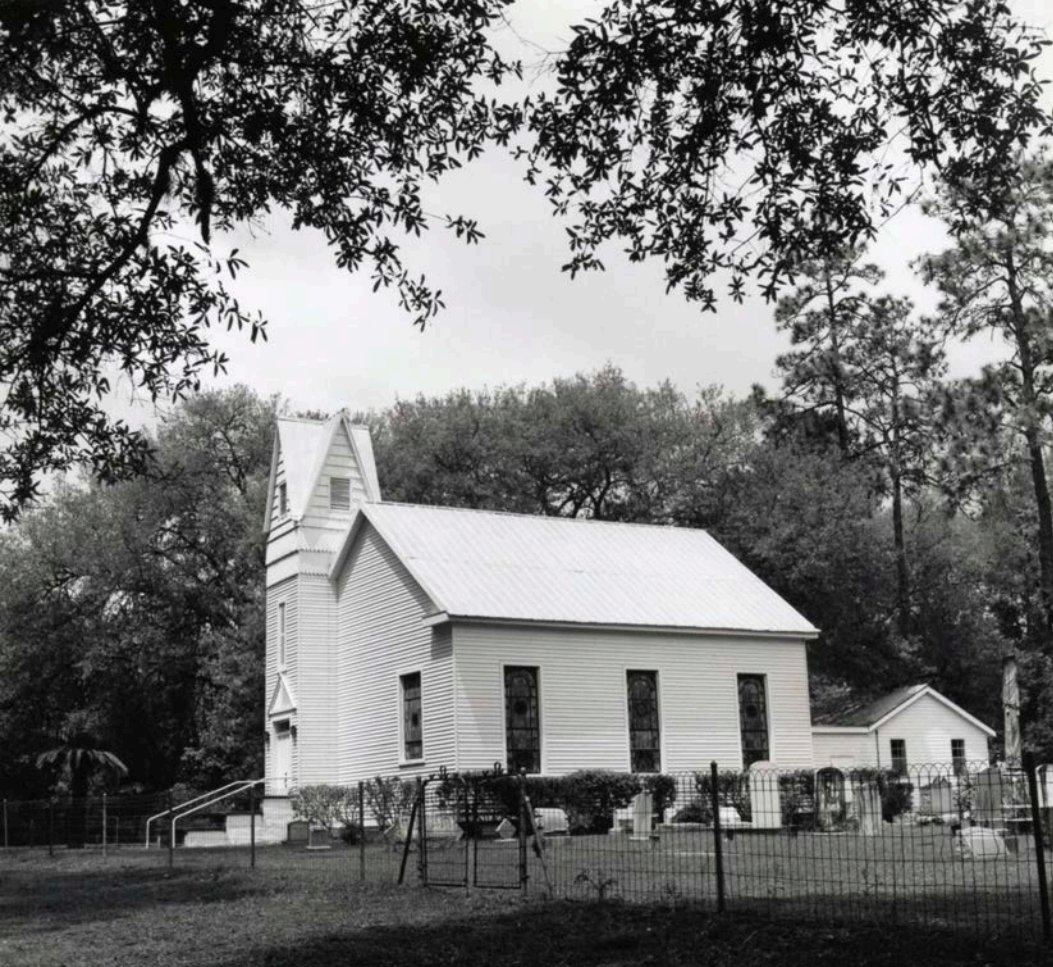
Of the new settlements, Barrsville arose as an economic rival to Ellisville. In 1870, Ellisville was a small community with a post office and two stores. The post office was run by Thomas Jawdon and the stores were operated by William S. Brush and John J. Barr. There was one physician, James Leffers.

Barrsville developed as a community located a half a mile east of the original Ellisville tract. It was founded by James C. Barrs, the cousin of John J. Barr, a merchandiser in Ellisville. Barrs was from the Nankin District of Brooks County, Georgia. He was born in 1821. James, and his brother, William Barrs, served on a Committee in Georgia to assist widows who found themselves destitute at the end of the Civil War. James arrived in Florida via a cotton barge.

Barrsville originally started as an agricultural settlement for the cultivation of citrus and oranges as part of the larger agricultural plat of Major Giles Underwood Ellis. The area may have first been settled by Stephen Henson but was purchased by James Barrs, who opened a general store on June 8, 1871. The “Jim Barrs” general store served as the center of Barrsville and was the location of the community post office which he chartered in 1872.

Barrsville was situated along the Old Military and Telegraph Road about 14 miles south of Lake City and eight miles north of the Santa Fe River. It was approximately two miles west of the community of Olustee Creek which was located on the northwest side of the bend of Olustee Creek. Barrsville may have extended as far





Many of the communities in southeastern Columbia County sprouted up around churches, like Mikesville Presbyterian Church.

as the Lutheran church, but the next closest settlement was known as Grofton, which was located four miles to the north and whose history has been lost to time. The entire area was intended to be the route of an ill-fated rail line that failed to materialize.

#### MIKESVILLE

Mikesville was also established around 1870 by G.M. Whetstone. Whetstone was a thriving entrepreneur in Columbia County, owning several general merchandising stores, grist mills, sawmills, and cotton gins. He was born in Spartanburg, S.C., in 1830. He married Elizabeth Charity Likes of Spartanburg, S.C., in 1856 then moved to Columbia County in 1860. He was the first Postmaster of the town of Leno. He went by the name of Mike Whetstone, and the community of Mikesville would be named after him. He served in the Florida 2nd Calvary as a Colonel during the Civil War.

Whetstone founded many local businesses including Whetstone & Gunnin in Barrsville and four G.M. Whetstone General Merchandise Stores located in Mikesville, Leno, Mount Tabor and Fort White. Mikesville grew into a thriving community. By 1883, the population stood at 140. Whetstone owned the general store, a grist mill, and cotton gin, and held the postal contract.

Whetstone's holdings eventually outgrew most of his competitors, and he profited more heavily from real estate. He found that he profited when others made money and were successful. Whetstone served as a County Commissioner for Mikesville from 1883-1885. During this period, he helped form the Mikesville Guard, under his command in 1881. It was established at the same time as the Columbia Light Infantry under Capt. J.F. Baya. These units served as the early national guard for the area.

Whetstone also helped to establish and build Mikesville Presbyterian Church. The original church was built on land donated by Dr. Samuel Means with lumber sawed at the local Whetstone Mill. Between 1868 and 1869, several families from South

Carolina blazed the Wiregrass trail to settle in southern Columbia County. These were Scotch-Irish Presbyterians who worked together to fell the timber to build their own homes and erect a temporary place of worship. At first, they worshiped with the Lutherans, but in 1873, they formed a Presbyterian body. They were known as the Ellisville Church, but in 1876, they adopted the name New Hope Presbyterian Church. In 1877, part of the congregation petitioned the Florida Presbytery to form a separate organization at Mikesville, and on June 16, 1877, the Mikesville Presbyterian Church was organized with 25 charter members.

**"The first members used and carved out a mounting stump from fat lighter in which steps were cut out for women who rode horseback or on carriages to assist them in getting in and out of the buggies easier."**

Two other prominent churches in Mikesville were Philippi and the Advent Church. Philippi Baptist Church was first organized in 1877. John Vinzant Jr. and wife Mattie A. Vinzant deeded four acres of land for \$5 to the trustees of Philippi in August 1879. John Vinzant and Hugh R. Williams served as the original two trustee of the church, and they held church services in a log cabin.

The first members used and carved out a mounting stump from fat lighter in which steps were cut out for women who rode horseback or on carriages to assist them in getting on and off their horses or in and out of the buggies easier. When the cemetery was surveyed by Gonzalo and Annie Graham, they placed a wrought iron



fence around the "Mounting Stump" which still stands.

Mikesville also established an Advent Christian Church at the end of the 19th Century. Mikesville Advent Christian church was organized on Nov. 30, 1896, with 28 charter members. A church was erected by the members, and it became known as Mt. Zion Advent Christian Church until the 1950s when its name changed to Mikesville Advent Christian Church.

The Whetstones contributed greatly to Mikesville's and Columbia County's development. G.M. Whetstone's son, David Eugene Whetstone, was a notary public in Columbia County in 1900. He managed the Lake City Hotel in 1902. He also owned the Whetstone Telephone Company in Lake City from 1902-1903 and was manager of the Blanche Hotel from 1903 -1907.

One of the early and important settlers of Ellisville and Mikesville was Dr. Samuel C. Means. Dr. Means was born in 1803 in Union County, S.C. Dr. Means married Nancy Vernon Whetstone in 1823 in South Carolina. He is believed to have moved to Columbia County and built a log cabin in and around the start of the Civil War near a place called Hammock Branch. In 1881, Dr. Means left his home at Hammock Branch and built a two-story house in Mikesville. The home was known for a giant oak that had a flat top that was caused when a mule jumped over the tree and broke the top off. His home was located off of Mikesville Presbyterian Church Road.

Another prominent family to settle in Mikesville were the Lites. John and Martha B. Frazier Lites settled in the vicinity of what became Mikesville in the 1850s. John was born in Abbeville, S.C., in 1821. His son James R. Lites became a leading politician and business figure from the community. During the Civil War, James enlisted in the 1st Reserve

Infantry of Florida under Captain Hodges and Colonel Turney and was mustered into service on July 19, 1864. He returned back to Columbia County and began to farm.

James clerked in Mikesville from 1873 to 1884. He later served as a manager for G.M. Whetstone. He continued with the company in Fort White until 1900. He returned to farming for the next six years. James was elected as the County Treasurer following George B. Ellis. He served in the job for 10 years until the legislature abolished the position. In 1917, he was elected as Superintendent in Columbia County and served in that capacity until 1921.

The Grahams were another pioneer family of the Mikesville community. The Graham family arrived in Florida following the Civil War. Peter Graham was born in 1817 in Richmond, N.C. The family moved to Fort White. Grandson George, born in 1885, was raised in the southern part of Columbia County on the Graham Plantation. He had little education then at the age of 17, he realized the importance of going to school, so he began his studies and did not let up until he had a Bachelor's of Agriculture and a Master's Degree from the University of Florida. He also took four years at a teacher's college.

He later worked as the Principal of Mason City and also taught agriculture at a number of different schools. Graham was elected as the Superintendent of Public Education for two terms from 1929 to 1936.

#### LENO

Whetstone was also founder of the town of Keno/Leno in 1870. The area had long been used as a crossroad because of the natural bridge over the Santa Fe. It was originally settled as an outgrowth of a military camp that was established by Henry Matier in 1840. Matier was a mule salesman and may

A group is seen hanging out in Leno in 1902, including Leda Huston Means on the limb with children Vernon McFadden and Mary Loud McFadden.





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have used the river and natural bridge to move his animals.

Whetstone bought controlling interest in the area and opened a general store and large hotel. The hotel was designed to cater to many visitors and had doors on all four sides. Because Whetstone wanted to attract settlers and considered it a risky venture, he named the town Keno after the gambling game to make the community look like it was a business and entertainment center. Whetstone was harassed by a circuit riding preacher for the name, who demanded it be changed. When he applied for a post office, the federal government would not grant a contract to a town with that name, so he changed the name to Leno. He received a contract and placed the post office and a telegraph office on the second story of his general store. The telegraph office was the first telegraph station in Florida. Whetstone later moved the post office to Mikesville.

### **HOPEFUL**

In the 1880s, the Hopeful community was one of the later settlements to be organized in the area, and it emerged around a new Baptist church. Hopeful Baptist was established on Aug 7, 1887 at Ebenezer Church. A church service was conducted by Rev. S.S. Proctor preceding a conference of individuals interested in establishing a new congregation. Twenty people presented their names for membership. At the meeting, a Church Covenant and Articles of Faith were read and unanimously adopted by those in attendance.

When the group met a second time in conference on Sept. 3, 1887, at Ebenezer Church, it was decided that the new church

would be named Hopeful Baptist reflective of the congregation's outlook for the future. Those present sought out membership in the Beulah Baptist Association by petition, and a building committee was appointed. On Oct. 17, 1887, Henry Dicks Sr. offered a site for the church to be built. The location was west of Dicks Pond about ½ mile south from the present church location.

Under the leadership of Pastor Charles Smith, a church was constructed. It was a small building with a door at the front and one window on each side. The windows had wooden shutters though they were later replaced by glass windows. The building was also used for school purposes for local children. The interior of the building had homemade school desks.

Among those families who came to call the Hopeful community home, the Markhams were among the first in the area. William I Markham moved with his family from Camden, Ga., to Alligator Territory in Columbia County in the 1820s. William was born in 1783 in Prince Edward, Va. He moved to Georgia and married Mary Gorman in 1803. William moved to Florida along with the family of Zachariah Roberts in the 1820s. He settled near High Falls and built a small cabin in 1828.

### **DICKS COMMUNITY**

Hopeful was at one time was called the Dicks Community. Joseph Dicks was an immigrant from Heyestbury, Wiltshire, England who settled in Columbia County around 1851. Joseph was born in, 1819. His father had been a soldier in the Napoleonic Wars. Joseph was apprenticed at an early age to a brush maker. The hairs on the brushes were made from the bristles of boar-

Hopeful Baptist hosts a dinner on the church grounds.







Members of the Mason City 4-H club cook a meal.

hogs, and the extraction of hairs from the hide was smelly and grueling work which Joseph came to despise. At the age of 14, he decided that he was going to do something different. He often visited his family on his days off, and after he decided to leave, he visited his mother and three sisters one last time, then instead of going back to work, he went and stowed away on a ship headed for America in 1833. He revealed himself after getting out to sea and was put to work until they reached Canada.

In Canada, Joseph went to work digging rock at a quarry. He stayed there until he turned 16 then made his way from Ottawa, Canada, to New York, where he enlisted in the Army. He was then sent south to fight in the Seminole Wars. He narrowly escaped being massacred along with Francis Dade and other American soldiers having been discharged a few days previous to the battle. Joseph married Sarah "Sallie" Taylor on Jan. 18, 1846, in Ocala. They made their way to Thomas, Ga., and started their family. They stayed in Georgia until 1851 then moved to Columbia County.

Joseph purchased the "Squatter" improvements of Johnny Markham and then took his land grant from his military service and improved 160 acres. Joseph was a farmer but also operated a store in Lake City with Mark Klein. His grandson remembered picking grapefruit from their orchard and selling them up and down the streets of Lake City in their carriage. He later built a sawmill and store on his farm that he used to build his homestead as well as many of the homes in the Hopeful community.

Joseph was also an antislavery advocate. He hired black laborers and worked them next to white workers and was harassed for his actions. He refused to fight in the Civil War for the Confederacy. Despite the objections

to his beliefs, he was a successful farmer and businessman. Joseph was a prosperous businessman, and when he died, he left a thousand dollars in gold pieces and several hundred dollars in greenbacks and silver to his children.

The Dicks children used this money to expand their land holdings by purchasing much of what was the Hagen tract owned by Andrew Brown Hagen.

#### MASON CITY

One of the last communities to emerge in southern Columbia County was Mason City. The community was most likely named because its proximity to a Masonic Lodge that had been established for the citizens of that region of Columbia County in 1872. Members charted the Mt. Tabor Masonic Lodge - Pasco Lodge No. 55 on Feb. 18, 1872. The Lodge was named for Samuel Pasco, who had been the Grand Master of the Masons in Florida for three years. The charter lasted until 1928 when it was surrendered. The meeting hall was located at the center of what would become Mason City and near where Mason City Consolidated School was later built.

One of the first families to settle the area that became Mason City was that of the Feagles.

Brothers John Wesley and William Marvin Feagle came to Columbia County in 1856. They were the cousins of David and Adam Witt and among the pioneering families of Bethlehem Lutheran Church. John Wesley Feagle was born in 1803 and William Marvin in 1806. In 1856, John Wesley and William Marvin Feagle received land grants and moved to Columbia County.

William's son, Hezekiah Feagle, followed his mother and father and uncle to Columbia



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County.

Hezekiah was a farmer and well known throughout the county. He belonged to the local Methodist Church, but when the Lutheran Church was organized, he joined the Lutheran congregation. During the Civil War, he served in Co. G, 2nd Florida Calvary under Capt. William Cone. The unit did scouting across the state and fought at the Battle of Olustee. Following the battle, he was assigned hospital service and tended to patients in Lake City night and day looking after the sick and wounded as they were brought from the front into Lake City. He was mustered out of service on May 9, 1865. Following the war, Hezekiah returned to farming.

Mason City produced many leading citizens of Columbia County. Percy Crowley Witt was born in 1892 in Columbia County. He married Zelma L. Ivey on Nov. 2, 1918. Percy and Zelma settled in the community of Mason where he was a merchant and general merchandiser. Percy was also politically active having served in the Florida House of Representatives for Columbia County from 1923-1925. He eventually settled in Ellisville where he was a general farmer.

Percy's brother, Horace Jacob Witt, was also a leading politician of the area. Horace Jacob Witt was born in 1895. He served in World War I in the U.S.N.R. (PHM3). Following the war, he farmed in the Mason community and was politically active serving as a County Commissioner for District 4 from 1944 to 1948.

Another prosperous settler of Mason was Mack Cleveland Houser. Mack Houser was born on in 1885 in Shoal Creek Township, Logan, Ark. Mack married Pearl Horn on Sept.

19, 1909, in New Blaine, Logan, Ark. During the teens, Mack moved to the Mason community in Columbia County.

Mason City may not have developed into the communal center that it became had it not been for the establishment of Mason City Consolidated School in 1924.

Columbia County's educational administrators believed that smaller schools were unable to offer the curriculum that a larger facility could, so many of the rural one-room schools were combined to offer better educational opportunities. Five schools were consolidated into Mason including Live Oak, Ellisville, Desoto, Mt. Tabor and Avery. The school was dedicated by Superintendent J.W. Burns and opened its doors on Oct. 18, 1924. The school was located along U.S. Highway 41 where the Mason City Community Center is today. For 28 years, Mason City served as the educational, social, and communal center for much of southeastern Columbia County. The school brought many of the children of southern Columbia County together.

When the Dixie Highway was completed and paved between 1926 and 1929, businesses not located along the highway closed.

Despite those losses, the highway helped to breathe new life into Ellisville as it came to serve as a central business location for the surrounding area. A number of new businesses developed along the road to cater to locals as well as travelers headed to south Florida.

During the late '30s and '40s, many made their way into the area because of the establishment of Oleno State Park. The state of Florida purchased lands around the town of old

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Leno (O'Leno) in 1934. During the Great Depression, the Civilian Conservation Corps helped to build cabins and infrastructure at the park, and when completed, it became a tourist attraction.

Williard Graham also owned a grocery store in Ellisville in the 1950s. The store was later purchased by Junior and Norma Jean Dicks in partnership with L.J. Crawford and renamed D&C Grocery. Junior and Norma Jean oversaw the daily operations of the business. They carried feed, seed, fertilizer, gas, diesel, wire, meat, and dry goods. Junior butchered his own steers and hogs. Customers could go to his feed lot and pick out the animals that they wanted butchered. They were also a pecan buying point and had a contract with Claxton Pecan Company in Claxton, Ga.

Between D&C Grocery and Witt's Grocery, Claude "Buck" Polhill owned an automobile repair shop and garage. Other stores included Roy and Agnes Hines gas station and small general store in the area between Ellisville and Mikesville on 41.

There was a souvenir shop located in Mason City across the street from the school. The Palmer family later purchased the location and built a go cart track in Mason City in the 1950s.

J.B. Witt owned a souvenir store in Watermelon Park that sold trinkets and fresh cold watermelons. He placed a car on a mound as an advertisement and cut watermelons in half which he lined up along the road like a Burma shave sign to attract customers.

Roy Powell owned the Watermelon Superette on the corner where the S&S is today. Watermelon trucks parked and

loaded watermelons under a giant oak giving name to the area.

Many small businesses thrived along 441. After the interstate was built between 90 and Alachua Co. from 1963 to 1964, the area began to slowly change.

Many families know the histories of their ancestors and the communities that they helped to forge, and they carry the legacy of those places with them in their hearts and minds.



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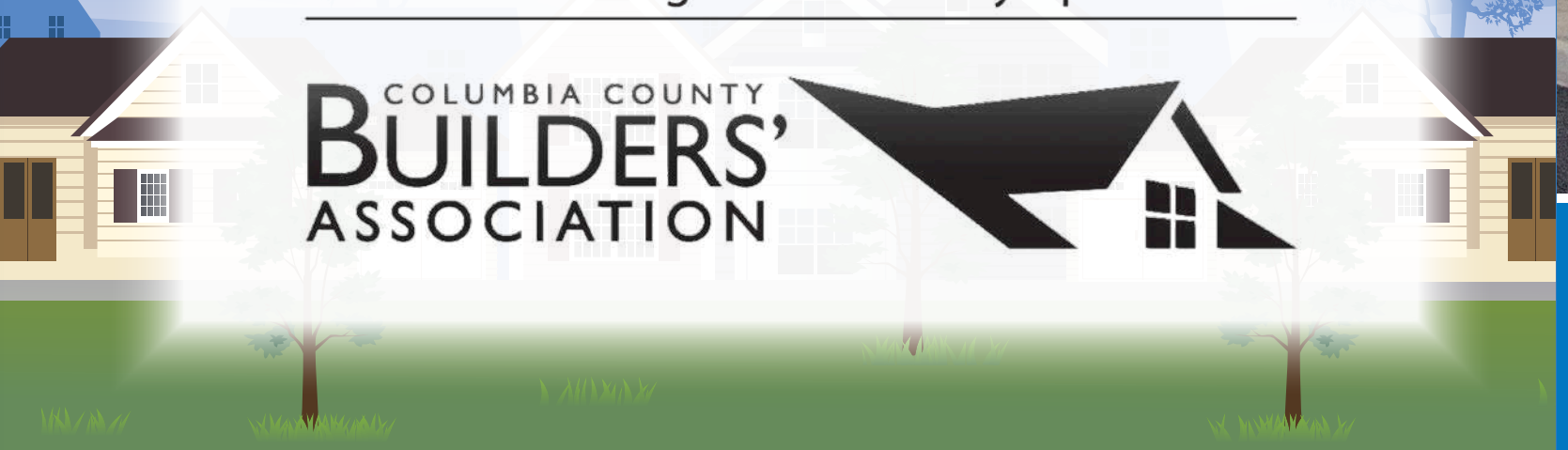
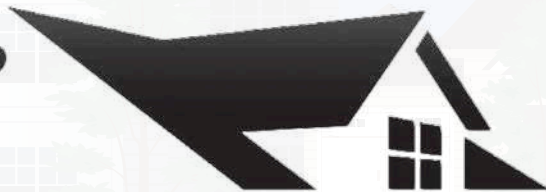


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