



The Historical Society of Orange Park

May 2026 Newsletter

The weather is warming up and our yards and gardens are colorful once again! May provides several opportunities to get out in the community and enjoy the company of friends. This month features our Members Only Tea on May 7 followed by our regular open house at the Clarke House on May 10. The next weekend, on May 16, we will host a special Veterans Mayors Cemetery Tour at Magnolia Cemetery. The Clay County Historical Society will also be hosting Railroad Day Festival on Saturday, May 9. In this month's newsletter, enjoy reading about the Tea House on Stiles Avenue, Herbert Morris in this month's Veterans Corner, and the history of the Catholic Church in Orange Park. We are also pleased to announce the winner of our first scholarship award, Miss Rebecca Chapman.

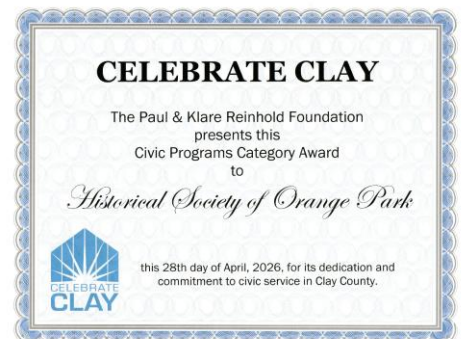
We hope you enjoy the newsletter!

Calendar of Events

Date	Time	Event	Location
May 7, 2026	10:00 AM – 12:00 PM	Member Tea Party	Clarke House
May 9, 2026	10:00 AM – 4:00 PM	Railroad Day Festival	Green Cove Springs
May 10, 2026	2:00 PM – 4:00 PM	Open House	Clarke House
May 16, 2026	10:00 AM – 12:00 PM	Veterans & Mayors Cemetery Tour	Magnolia Cemetery
May 17, 2026	10:00 AM – 3:00 PM	Farmers Market Booth	Town Hall Park
June 14, 2026	2:00 PM – 4:00 PM	Open House	Clarke House
July 12, 2026	2:00 PM – 4:00 PM	Open House	Clarke House

Celebrate Clay

On Tuesday, April 28, the Paul E. & Klare N. Reinhold Foundation hosted their annual Celebrate Clay breakfast at the Thrasher-Horne Conference Center. The objective of Celebrate Clay is to acknowledge, reward, and promote community service within Clay County. Both non-profit organizations and individuals were honored for their outstanding work in a variety of fields including Arts & Culture, Civic Service, Educations, Health and Human Services, Aid to Seniors, and Services to Youth and Families. Cash awards totaling \$100,000 were presented to 47 deserving organizations and individuals. This year, the Society was honored to be recognized and



receive a Category Award in the amount of \$1,000. It was a privilege to join an inspiring group of dedicated individuals who bring positive change to countless Clay County residents. We sincerely appreciate the Reinhold Foundation for including us in this year's event and for their unwavering commitment to supporting community service throughout Clay County.

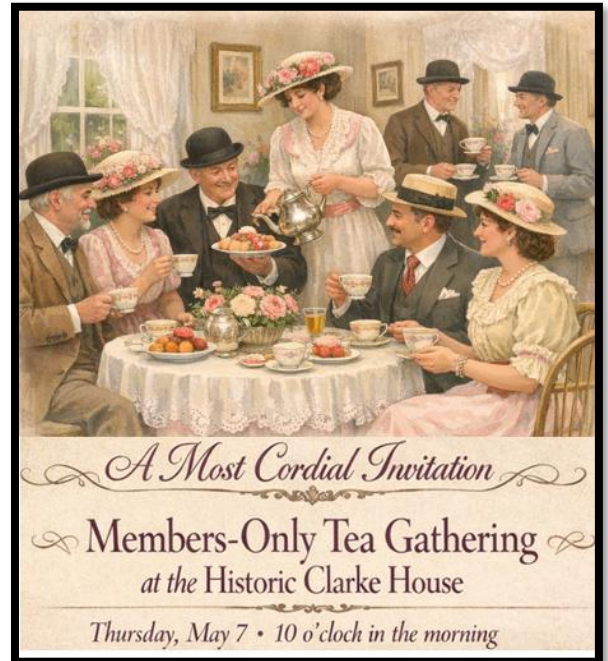
Members Opportuni-Tea Party

Join us for a gentle morning of tea, conversation, and fellowship at 10 AM, May 7 in the Clarke House.

Whether you are newly joined or have been part of our Society for many years, this gathering offers a charming opportunity to mingle, share stories, and renew the spirit of community that binds us. There is no cost and nothing required—but if you want to share a treat, please feel free.

Kindly let us know you will attend before May 5, 2026.

Either email us at info@ophistory.org or click on the following link: [HSOP members: Opportuni-TEA](#)



Magnolia Cemetery Tour – Veterans & Mayors – A Call to Service



Join us at 10 AM on May 16 at Magnolia Cemetery for an opportunity to learn about a family of veterans, our Pearl Harbor Triangle of Veterans. We will also share stories about some of our early mayors and how their contributions advanced Orange Park both economically and geographically. Sandra DiGiovanni will conduct a tour through the cemetery that will entertain, educate and enlighten. Please join us.

Historical Society of Orange Park Awards Scholarship, By Bob Scallan

While the Historical Society participates in many community events throughout the year, the Board recognized an opportunity to give back in a more lasting way—by offering an educational scholarship to a local high school senior preparing for college. A set of criteria and a formal application process were developed and distributed to area high schools.

In our inaugural year, five outstanding students applied for the scholarship. After carefully reviewing each applicant's academic record, school and community involvement, and personal essay, the selection committee was proud to award the scholarship to **Rebecca Chapman**.

Ms. Chapman is a truly remarkable student. She serves as president of two organizations, holds the title of **Miss Orange Park High School 2026**, has completed over **2,000 volunteer hours**, and is highly respected and admired by her teachers. The Historical Society of Orange Park is immensely honored to recognize Rebecca Chapman as the very first recipient of this award.



Rebecca Chapman and Cindy Cheatwood

Veterans' Corner – Herbert Hoover Morris, By Sandra DiGiovanni

This month we are back to highlighting one of our many veterans in Magnolia Cemetery. This month, we feature Herbert Hoover Morris. His contributions to the Town of Orange Park are numerous and significant. Herbert Morris served in WWII. After his military discharge, he continued to serve in the Town of Orange Park.

Herbert Hoover Morris was born in Carrolton, Georgia in 1920. He was the youngest of four children. By 1927, the family had moved to Duval County and continued south to Orange Park by 1935.

Herbert joined the Army Air Corp October 28, 1943, shortly after his brother James joined. The adjacent article, from the Jacksonville Journal on January 30th, 1943, shows how proud his family was that both sons were serving in the military.

Herbert advanced to Master Sergeant during his time in the Army Air Corp.



By 1950, Herbert was back in Orange Park, he married Evangeline Strom and they settled in Orange Park. Herbert was working as an aircraft mechanic for the Florida National Guard and Evangeline was working for the telephone company. Herbert began his municipal service on the Zoning Board. By 1957, he was elected to serve on the Town of Orange Park Commission and was assigned duties as the Building Commissioner and Town Clerk.

In 1958 he was elected to the newly organized Clay County Civil Defense Council, representing the Town of Orange Park. This group was instructed to map an adequate program for the county as quickly as possible. He served on this council for several years.

His role as Building Commissioner was pivotal in 1960 when the Town Hall building faced the prospect of being condemned. The old stucco building, deeded to the town in 1940 by the Loyal Order of Moose, was in such poor condition that the Lions Club had to evacuate a large room on the second floor that was used as a meeting room. Herbert blamed the condition on age and lack of maintenance. The town buildings were constructed in 1891 and housed the Orange Park Normal and Industrial School until 1921 when the Loyal Order of Moose purchased them to establish Moosehaven. All the buildings were deeded to the town in 1940. Morris, as well as a majority of the commissioners, were in favor of tearing it down and constructing a new town hall.



Architect's Drawing of Proposed Orange Park Municipal Center

Eventually a new town hall was constructed along with a library, and a police and fire department building in 1962. But Herbert still had other issues to contend with concerning Orange Park. By 1963 the State Road Department was exploring sites for a bridge across the St. Johns River that would be part of the Interstate 295 beltway.

One of the sites being considered was at Stiles Avenue. Herbert was quoted in the Jacksonville Journal “... one of the sites under consideration would cut the town in half. We would lose too much residential property which we cannot afford to give up.” Fortunately, the bridge location ended up being further north and the town was not split.

Herbert Morris never got to see the completion of the bridge as he died in 1964 at the young age of 44. He is laid to rest in Magnolia Cemetery next to his wife Valeria Evengeline Strom Morris.

Honor a Veteran—Leave a Lasting Legacy



Now is a wonderful time to order a legacy paver in honor of a veteran who has touched your life. Each engraved paver will become a permanent part of the Veterans Memorial at Magnolia Cemetery, preserving their service and sacrifice for generations to come. Consider placing a tribute that tells their story and ensures their legacy is remembered. Order forms are available at the Veterans memorial or via our website at <https://ophistory.org/veterans-memorial>.

Orange Park Memories, By Cindy Cheatwood

The Historical Society is highlighting Orange Park’s historic houses each month of 2026. This month we feature the Tea House at 167 Stiles Ave, built in 1925. This Colonial Revival house was for Mr. and Mrs. C.F. Knight. (a former mayor of Orange Park). It originally was a three-bedroom house with a sleeping porch on the east side of the house.



Iola and Finley Knight

Finley and Iola Knight brought their two children, Doris and Finley Jr., from Mandarin to Orange Park in 1924. Iola was already a success with the Robinwood Grill, and so, opened a tearoom in their new home in Orange Park. The 11-room English bungalow of brown-stained shingles was large enough for a family with teenagers. It was not long before the house was known simply as *Robinwood*.

One 1927 article describes the scene: “*Many congenial parties took advantage of the ideal Florida weather, motoring to Orange Park and entertaining their friends at this charming place.*”

Finley Knight had an active civic life. He served Orange Park as commissioner, clerk, tax assessor, treasurer, and eventually mayor. In 1933 he became president of the Jacksonville Rotary Club. Iola, born in Bermuda, was a member of the Jacksonville chapter of the Daughters of the British Empire, and belonged to church and garden circles in addition to her running the Tea Room. Finley and Iola both died in the early 1930s.

In an odd coincidence, two men who later lived at the home were Cecil Field pilots who had crashes while living at 167 Stiles. Commander Geoffrey B. King, Jr. attached to the USS Saratoga, died when his jet

crashed at sea in 1959. Cmdr. John C Christenssen crashed, but survived, the following year when his nose wheel collapsed while landing at Cecil Field in 1960.

There are gaps in the ownership chain. The house became home again when Joe and Mary Ellen DeMarco found it and restored it. The Knights would be very pleased with the results. The DeMarcos have invested countless hours preserving it with a careful eye on its history.

The Knight home rested on a raised pier-and-beam foundation, with original wood windows and cedar shingles that remained intact for decades. When Joe and Mary Ellen DeMarco purchased the house in 1996, their restoration work revealed the home's original materials and finishes. Cedar shingles were buried beneath layers of gray, gold, and blue paint. The original windows; and the 1920s electrical and plumbing that remained kept the home's historic footprint and character intact.



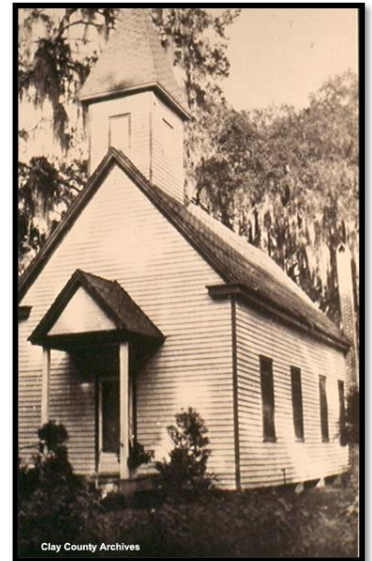
The Tea House

It was a long process of bringing it back to life. The DeMarcos started with only a couple of usable rooms, living in the middle of a restoration. They rebuilt footings, scraped away paint, upgraded wiring and plumbing, refurbished bathrooms, and painted every room. It continues to be a source of projects and preservation.

Orange Park's Catholic History, By Cindy Cheatwood

Catholic life in Orange Park began quietly in 1877, when the Diocese of St. Augustine built the first recorded St. Catherine's Catholic Church, a small wooden structure at the NE corner of Reed St. and Stowe Ave. designed for just 54 people and operated under Immaculate Conception in Jacksonville. For decades the building had no electricity; and a wood stove was its only utility.

Meanwhile in Jacksonville, starting in 1886, Sister Mary Ann, of the Sisters of St. Joseph, who was remembered as the "Angel of Mercy," opened St. Mary's Home for orphans on Ocean Street. The need was so great that a larger building rose in 1890, followed by a new wing in 1899. Disaster struck in 1901 when the Great Fire destroyed the home, but the benefactors of the Sisters rebuilt the following year at 427 Ocean Street, continuing their work with new energy. The plumbing for this 3-story building was provided by William Clarke, father-in-law of Orange Park's Carrie Clarke.



Over time, the Sisters expanded beyond the city. In 1917, they purchased a summer home at Pablo Beach, where children stayed until 1926. At the same time, Orange Park's Catholic population was slowly

increasing, especially after Moosehaven opened in 1922. Early residents often traveled to Jacksonville for Mass. By 1924, Father James Meehan was ministering to the small but growing St. Catherine's community.

A major turning point came in 1930, when newspapers announced that the Catholic Church had purchased the Appleby estate in Orange Park, 19 acres stretching from the St. Johns River to the Atlantic Coast Line Railroad. The \$16,000 property included a large house that was quickly remodeled and expanded into a summer home for the children of St. Mary's. Plans called for a dormitory to house 90 children immediately, with capacity for 200 the following year. Children under 3 years old would remain in Jacksonville, while older children would spend their summers in Orange Park. By 1943, the estate featured dormitories, a dining hall, a swimming pool, a pavilion, and wide open play areas. Younger girls crafted artwork, while teenage girls studied business courses to prepare for their futures.

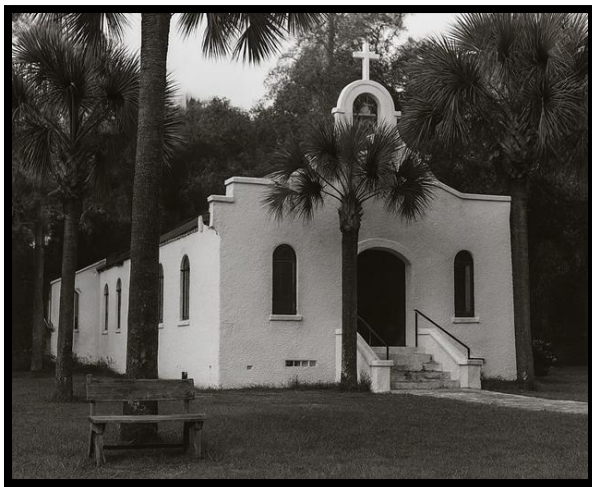


St. Mary's Orange Park Orphanage



Children at play in the orphanage pool

To support both the children and the growing Catholic community, a small wooden chapel was built on Blake Avenue. It became a place for Mass, catechism, and quiet reflection. Bishop Patrick Barry had used his own personal funds to finance the construction of the chapel. Ironically, the first major mass held in 1940, Bishop Barry's own funeral Mass.



"Barry's Chapel"

By the 1950s, St. Catherine's Mission had outgrown its early structures. From 1952 to 1970, "Barry's Chapel" served as the parish church, hosting weddings, funerals, bazaars, and community gatherings. Newspaper notices from 1970 show Masses split between the Blake Avenue chapel and S. Bryan Jennings School, as the parish that had grown to more than 250 families. That same year, Father Edward Rooney became pastor, and under his leadership St. Catherine's Mission was officially reclassified to parish status. Plans for a new church on Kingsley Avenue moved quickly; and the new St. Catherine's Church was dedicated on September 26, 1971.

While the parish flourished, the Sisters' era in Orange Park was ending. By 1965–66, St. Mary's Home in Jacksonville had closed, and the Sisters no longer used the Orange Park property. Title passed to the Diocese of St. Augustine, and the once-busy Blake Avenue chapel entered a period of uncertainty. In the early 1970s, a judo business met there illegally and in 1973, the Heritage Christian Academy occupied the site without permission in 1975. A lengthy zoning battle followed, culminating in a 1977 court ruling requiring Heritage Christian Academy to close because it had never obtained the zoning exception required for schools and churches in residential neighborhoods.

With the property abandoned and the chapel no longer needed, the Diocese deconsecrated the building. Thanks to the generosity of Virginia Mims, owner of the Village Nursery, the chapel was donated to the Orange Park Community Theater. In 1987, the small wooden church was lifted onto a flatbed truck and moved to the corner of Bolton and Filmore Streets, where it was transformed into a performance space. The theater opened its first season in the renovated chapel that same year.

Today, the corner of Blake and River Road bears no memory of the St. Mary's Summer Home for Orphaned Girls. The original chapel site on Blake Avenue is a quiet residential lot. No trace remains of the sanctuary where generations of children played, where Moosehaven residents attended Mass, where parishioners celebrated sacraments, and where the Sisters of St. Joseph nurtured hundreds of young lives. It is fitting to bring this story back to Orange Park. The story is a reminder of our capacity to care for one another.

May is National Preservation Month

Preservation Month is a time to share how the historic places we love spark joy, inspire wonder, and connect members of our community to our shared history.

The places that make us who we are deserve to be celebrated — and protected! This year's national theme is "All People Are Created Equal" in recognition of the 250th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence.



Join us at Town Hall for the Town Council Meeting at 7 PM on May 5th for the official reading of Orange Park's Historical Preservation Month Proclamation. Then, on May 17th, visit the Farmers Market at Town Hall Park between 10 am – 3 pm as The Historical Society of Orange Park partners with the Historic Preservation Board of Orange Park to highlight the historical places in our town. This is your opportunity to ask the Preservation Board questions about the places you care about.

Happy Preservation Month!

Green House (Clarke Cottage) Set for Preservation, By Cindy Cheatwood

The Green House has a rich history, emblematic of agricultural Florida. Built in 1925, it was constructed with the help of the Pecan Grove workers who would go on to live there from 1925 until around 1943. Mr. Clarke's death in 1943 shifted the use from being a home for agricultural laborers to a source of rental income for Mrs. Clarke that sustained her until her death in 1979. It was the last renter, most likely, who left the water running, never to return. There is no telling how long water flowed from a broken washing machine into the kitchen, soaking and ruining much of the wood there, all the way to the understorey's floor joists and beams.



From 1979 until 1991, the Clarke's daughter-in-law, Georgia Self and her son, Walter, lived in the Clarke House but the cottage was not used. The Town of Orange Park bought the remaining 15 acres of the Clarke estate in 1991. Little was done with it for years. On July 15, 1998, The William Clarke Estate was added to the U.S. National Register of Historic Places, thanks to the efforts of Mary Ann Study, John Bowles and future members of the newly forming Historical Society of Orange Park (est. 2003).

For years, the cottage, water-damaged and forlorn, was used as a storage area for things the Town had nowhere else to house. Ernest Jones, a long-time employee of Public Works who appreciated the history of local structures, saved construction elements from older homes being demolished, storing them inside the Green House. Some of those items are still there today.



The goal of current restoration work is to preserve the building and make it safe for adult groups to gather for educational, patriotic, civic, social, and/or other community-growing activities. The Society will need to accumulate funds for things like a mini-split, ductless air conditioning system, window coverings, very basic cabinetry around the kitchen and bathroom sinks, as well as tankless water heating units for both sinks. Donations are being accepted to gather funds for these things that are beyond the scope of the grant being used for preservation.

The Society hopes to share the story of the house in conjunction with that of the Clarke House. The cottage porches are supported by plumbing pipe from Mr. Clarke's Jacksonville plumbing business. The wood trim and doors in the cottage mirror those in the Clarke House, no doubt designed from the familiar style so easy to copy. Beneath the floors, the entire structure is lined with concrete, providing an environment for pecans to mature. This is pure Florida agricultural history, frugal, practical and made to last. Since 2020, the Society's book sales have been dedicated to fund-raising for the preservation about to be undertaken. It is not enough, but it helps. If you know of a corporate sponsor who might be able to help, please share this information. Together, we can make this a valued community resource.

Clay County Historical Society – Railroad Festival



Look For Us Online

Look for the Historical Society of Orange Park online via our website, www.ophistory.org, our [Instagram](#) page or our [Facebook](#) page. Both sources provide updates on society news and activities.

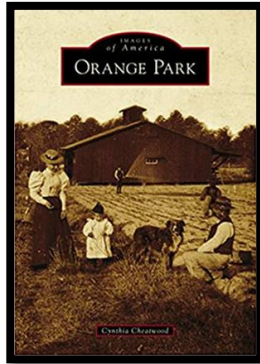
Got pics?

The Society is looking for photographs to add to our resources. If you have long-time-ago images of people and/or places in Orange Park, please share them. In this increasingly visual world, there is a lot to learn from these glimpses of our past. You can share them through email at info@ophistory.org or through mail at P. O. Box 08, Orange Park, 32067. Originals will be returned after the Society makes a scan.



Images of America: Orange Park

Images of America: Orange Park, authored by Historical Society President, Cynthia Cheatwood, is a wonderful way to learn about the history of Orange Park. This book shares the history of our town through archival photographs and stories collected from a variety of sources. The cost of the book is \$20 for members of our Society, \$25 for non-members and \$27 for online orders.



Clarke House Tours

Please join us Sunday, May 10, from 2 PM to 4 PM to tour the Clarke House. The Clarke House, built in 1912, served as the family home for William and Carrie Clarke for many years. It features hardwood floors, plaster walls and ceilings and large, spacious rooms with many windows for good ventilation. It was a comfortable home and the Clarke family shared many happy memories there.



Links to Local History

For more events and activities related to local history, please visit the following:

- [Clay County Historical Society](#)
- [Middleburg Museum](#)
- [Historical Society of Penny Farms](#)
- [Mandarin Museum and Historical Society](#)
- [Keystone Heights Heritage Commission](#)
- [Clay County Archives](#)

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