



# The Historical Society of Orange Park

## August 2026 Newsletter

Hello August! We hope everyone has had a memorable July and are enjoying our bright summer days. This month we highlight the Orange Park Library's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary as part of the Clay County Library System. We are also hosting our regular Open Houe at the Clarke House this month.

A recent article entitled, "The Ghosts of New Sweden", by DP Curtain, (<https://www.frontporchrepublic.com/2026/07/ghosts-of-new-sweden/>), described a small Swedish community that was established along the banks of the Delaware River in early colonial times. The Swedish community was short-lived and ultimately absorbed by the larger English colony of Pennsylvania and subsequent population growth. However, signs of the old Swedish community are still visible if one cares to look closely. Those that followed, assimilated and benefited from that which the Swedes established. From the article, "Every community is built upon foundations laid by older ones, and is at times the unconscious heir of the forgotten past. We inherit places we did not build and civilizations whose origins we do not fully comprehend. Understanding the cultural layers of our own civilization deepens our attachment to it. To know a place well, to be a denizen of a specific locale, is to know something of those who loved it before us." Orange Park has its own unique history. It has been home to people from a variety of cultures and backgrounds. Their fingerprints are everywhere. They have shaped everything from our homes, our streets, our schools, our shops to our government. We are fortunate to have physical reminders such as the Helfrich house and Club Continental but we are also fortunate to have the stories of those who came before. Take the time to get to know our town's history and appreciate those that loved our home before us. History matters!

We hope you enjoy the newsletter!

### Calendar of Events

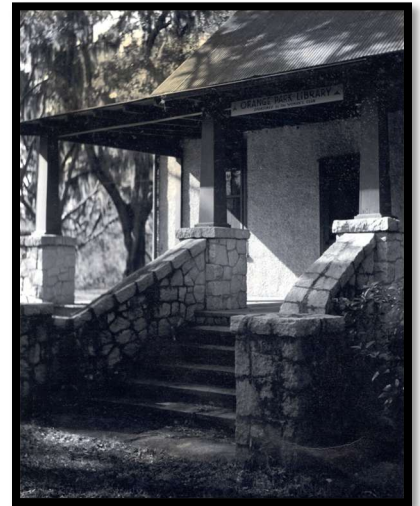
| Date               | Time              | Event                                     | Location            |
|--------------------|-------------------|-------------------------------------------|---------------------|
| August 3, 2026     | 6:00 PM – 7:00 PM | OP Library's 50 <sup>th</sup> Anniversary | Orange Park Library |
| August 9, 2026     | 2:00 PM – 4:00 PM | Open House                                | Clarke House        |
| September 13, 2026 | 2:00 PM – 4:00 PM | Open House                                | Clarke House        |
| October 11, 2026   | 2:00 PM – 4:00 PM | Open House                                | Clarke House        |
| October 24, 2026   | 4:00 PM – 6:00 PM | Moonlight on Magnolia                     | Magnolia Cemetery   |

## **The Orange Park Library- A 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary History**

The story of the Orange Park Library begins in 1911, when the Orange Park Woman's Club transformed a small wooden schoolhouse at the corner of Reid and McIntosh into the town's first lending library. With donated books placed on simple shelves, the women of the club created a space where both children and adults could borrow reading materials.

By 1930, the Woman's Club had moved the library into their own clubhouse, continuing to operate it as volunteers. As Orange Park grew, so did the library's needs, and in 1949 the collection was relocated to a new site at the corner of Kingsley Avenue and U.S. 17, placing it closer to the town's developing social and governmental hub.

In 1958, improvements were made to the Kingsley Avenue building, and by that time the library held 1,500 books, a sign of steady growth. Just five years later, in April 1963, the aging structure was replaced with a striking new "Butterfly" style building, opening with 3,000 books and allowing more services. Shortly after this move, the Friends of the Orange Park Library formed, establishing a support organization that continues to act as a community advocacy group today.



As the town continued to expand in the 1970s, plans for a larger, more permanent library took shape. In 1974, architect Jeffrey Schafer presented a proposed design for a new library in Town Hall Park, but the town council ultimately chose a different location. Two years later, in 1976, Orange Park celebrated the opening of its new library building and the branch still serves the community today. Local officials, Friends of the Library members, and families gathered for the dedication, where a ribbon was cut, symbolizing the library's transition from temporary bookmobile service to a fully modern public facility.

The library continued to evolve with Orange Park's population. In 1996, a major renovation and expansion, nearly \$2 million in scope, integrated the existing 8,000-square-foot brick-clad structure with a 21,000-square-foot addition. This project added new entrances, a dedicated children's wing with a story room, quiet study areas, improved circulation flow, and updated furnishings, transforming the library into a spacious, modern facility designed to meet the needs of a rapidly growing town.

From a one-room schoolhouse to a major public institution, the library's history reflects the story of Orange Park itself — a community continually investing in learning, connection, and the shared value of public gathering space.

You are invited to join the Historical Society at the Orange Park Branch Library on August 3rd from 6 PM - 7 PM as the Orange Park Branch Library celebrates its 50<sup>th</sup> year as part of the Clay County Library System. There will be multiple stations featuring the Historical Society of Orange Park, the Friends of the Library, Daughters of the American Revolution, craft stations, and more! Stop by our station as we look back with vintage photos and anecdotes. We look forward to seeing you there!



### **Clay County Historical Roundtable**

On July 7, 30 representatives and guests from all areas of Clay County gathered in the Headquarters Building Conference Room at Camp Blanding for the Semi-Annual Clay County Historical Roundtable. Representatives from the following groups/areas were on hand:

- African American Historical Society of Clay County
- Camp Blanding Museum
- Clay County Archives
- Clay County Historical Preservation Board
- Clay County Historical Society
- Clay County Tourism
- Historical Society of Orange Park
- Keystone Heights Heritage Commission
- Kingsley Lake
- Middleburg Museum
- The Military Museum of North Florida
- Penney Farms Historical Society



Each organization gave a brief update on their activities and challenges. Through their efforts much good work is being accomplished throughout the county. While each group has its own area of focus, collaboration between the various groups is critical. From networking to the sharing of resources and ideas, we all have the primary objective of preserving and sharing Clay County's rich history. Some of the discussion topics of the meeting were as follows:

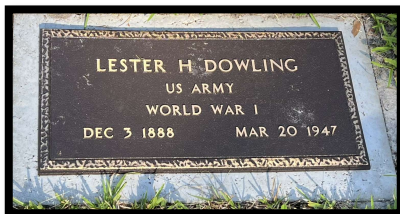
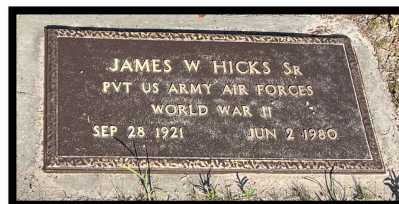
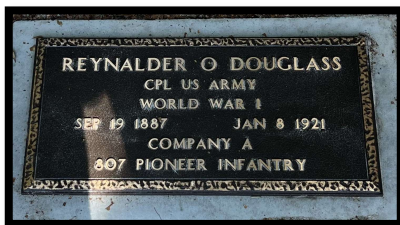
- The increasing presence and usefulness of social media to share information and promote our organizations, events and activities.
- The need for accuracy, transparency and ethical stewardship in an age of digital manipulation.
- The need for improved member engagement to help with activities, events and organizational continuity.
- The digitization of archival material to improve public access to this information.

The Roundtable meetings have proven to be not only popular, but very helpful in developing relationships between organizations, sharing information and helping us all understand the needs of Clay County's

historical community. We are grateful to Camp Blanding for allowing us to use their outstanding conference room and being gracious hosts. Our next Roundtable is tentatively scheduled for January.

### **Veterans Honored on Independence Day**

Over the past few years, Sandra DiGiovanni has been researching veterans interred in Magnolia Cemetery. During her research, Sandra learned that some veterans had not been properly recognized for their service and some had no marker at all. Sandra has been working diligently to procure and place grave markers for these veterans to rectify these issues. On July 4, Sandra led a tour at Magnolia Cemetery to present five new grave markers for Orange Park veterans and a temporary marker for a 6<sup>th</sup> veteran. Over the course of the tour, Sandra shared information about each veteran. Readers of this newsletter can look forward to learning about these veterans in Sandra's Veterans Corner articles in the coming months. We thank Sandra for her devotion and her service on behalf of our veterans. We also thank Sandra's husband, Barry, for his work preparing concrete bases for the new markers and placing them in Magnolia Cemetery.

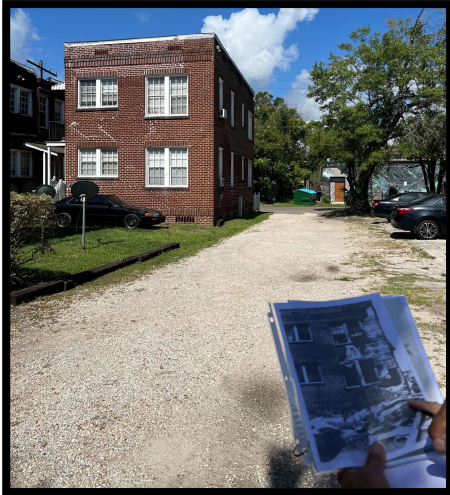


### **Tour to Commemorate Loss of Two P-51 Warplanes and their Pilots**

On July 20<sup>th</sup>, Bob Scallan led HSOP members on a walking tour through the Riverside area of Jacksonville. The tour was to commemorate the crashes of two P-51 Mustang fighter planes in that area on July 20<sup>th</sup>, 1944.

On the morning of July 20, 1944, two young pilots training to serve in World War II took off from Pinellas Airfield, near Largo, in their P-51 Mustangs. They disobeyed orders to stay in the Tampa Bay area and flew north to Jacksonville to make a low pass over the childhood home of one of the pilots. With a cruising speed more than 400 mph, the planes were over Jacksonville in 40 minutes. From an altitude of 1,000', the planes dove low and fast toward Post Street, leveling off about 75' above the street. At that altitude, the planes clipped trees causing the pilots to lose control





**Bob Scallan describes the crash site of the lead aircraft.**

of their aircraft resulting in the loss of both planes and pilots, the loss of one life on the ground and considerable damage to homes and other structures.

The tour began at the corner of Post and King Streets and proceeded west along Post Street. Bob's narrative brought the terrible events of that long ago Thursday morning to life as he detailed the accident and resulting damage block by block and home by home. Bob described the terrible damage done all the way to Willow Branch Avenue. In some areas, Bob was able to show the physical reminders of the damage caused that day in the form of repairs to various structures.

We are thankful for Bob for leading this tour and sharing the events of the day in vivid detail. We strongly encourage each of you to consider this tour the next time it is offered. In addition to being an interesting event in our local history it also illustrates in how good intentions can go awry and how quickly things can go wrong.

### **Orange Park Memories, By Cindy Cheatwood**

Each first of the month we highlight an historic home in Orange Park. For August, it is the Maierfeldt-Boatwright House - 2206 Reed Street, built in 1880. The first owner of this Reed Street property was Mary Jane Taylor who purchased the lot from Washington Gano Benedict, chief founder of the town. On May 11, 1878, William Maierfeldt purchased land in Orange Park to build a home and start a farm, becoming one of the town's founding patriarchs. This house and his 120-acre farm were situated on both sides of Plainfield Avenue, west to the river and south to Doctors Lake with 2100 feet on the water. The family operated a successful truck farm for forty years with crops and an orange grove that included 600 trees in orchard form. He also had 17 acres of fine peach trees, strawberries, tomatoes and Irish potatoes. There was even a small pear orchard because Mr. Maierfeldt had introduced the LaConte pear to the region.



William Maierfeldt told stories that would later be written in a small book, *Early Days in Orange Park*. The charming tales of life in early Orange Park are the stories of Florida and a growing nation. The close relationship between people and the environment reminds us to treasure simple things and to be stewards



of our resources. You read of steamboats and shenanigans, of enterprise and experiment. Maierfeldt's portrayal of the town's history helps readers conceptualize the time and place.

In 1956 George and Maxine Boatwright became the owners of this house on the corner of Reed Street and Milwaukee Avenue. It is reputed to be the second oldest house in Orange Park standing 1½ stories high with 3 gables, and a wood framed structure. Mr. Boatwright rebuilt part of the foundation. When remodeling the roof, he said that he was amazed to find that the roof lumber was crudely made. He expected that 100 years ago or

so, that Craftsmen would take pride and care in their work and take the time to make it solid.

The house has 2½ bedrooms upstairs, a dining area (once a kitchen), living room, a den (once a sewing room), and a bedroom downstairs. Mr. Boatwright added a kitchen and had made the old kitchen into a Spanish-style dining area. The ceilings are approximately 10 to 12 feet high.

The house seemed enchanted to the Boatwrights. George told of mysteries about the house. "Doors open and close, but I think they can be naturally explained," he said. Maxine Boatwright spoke about "house noises," doorknobs turning, witnessed from her seat across the room. They both talked of their dog who barked and growled for quite a while staring at the ceiling with his hair all standing on end. Once, one of their dogs was so scared and couldn't get out of the house, that he jumped through an upstairs window, screen and all. They didn't think of their home as spooky, for all homes have strange little noises and mysteries.

Maxine Boatwright was recognized for her outstanding citizenship. In 1956, Gov. Fuller Warren appointed her Justice of the Peace. She was a realtor and worked for 20 years in the civil service area of NAS Jax and won high praise for her work there.



### **Veterans Corner**, By Sandra DiGiovanni

As historians are apt to do, they find out about a family history not widely known. I do not consider myself a historian, but I do find family histories a lot during my search for veterans buried in Magnolia Cemetery. What follows is my most recent discovery.

In approximately 1880 a Civil War veteran named Samuel Jameson relocated to Orange Park from Wisconsin. He brought with him his wife Mary Ann and 2 children, Audice age 15 and John age 12. Samuel was a carpenter and enjoyed being involved in town activities. Prior to relocating to Orange Park, Samuel was able to purchase 40 acres of land from the Florida Land & Immigration Company for \$50 as well as an additional 29 acres from Washington G. Benedict for \$555.



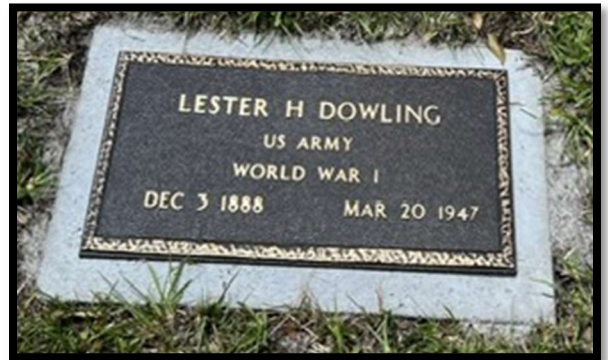
In 1884 his son John passed away in Orange Park. He was buried in lot 97 in the old section of Magnolia Cemetery. Samuel purchased the lot for \$5.00.

Happier news arrived in 1885 when his daughter Audice married Daniel Downing from Jacksonville. The Dowling's had 4 children, Lester in 1888, Alice in 1892, Charles in 1898 and finally Joseph in 1903. Daniel ran a lumber mill in Jacksonville for many years, but in 1910 he relocated the mill to Astor Park, Florida. It was in Astor Park that his daughter Alice met and married William Thompson, an employee of the lumber mill.

In 1917 Lester Dowling registered for the draft, but he was not called for duty. He was working for the City of Jacksonville as a bookkeeper. He had lost his right arm in an accident at his father's sawmill in 1908. Finally in

September 1918 he was called for duty and sent to Camp Wheeler (used as a staging area). He was honorably discharged in December of 1918.

The family eventually moved back to the Jacksonville area and by 1920, Audice was widowed and living with Alice and William Thompson. Daniel died between 1910 & 1920, not sure of the exact date, but it is possible he is buried in the family plot along with his wife Audice and son Lester. Lester passed in 1947 in an Atlanta hospital. He had one son, Lester C. Dowling who served during WWII and is buried in Arlington National Cemetery.



William and Alice Thompson had two sons, William Raleigh (1912) and Reginald (1914). William worked for the City of Jacksonville for 46 years. Alice died in 1935 and William died in 1957. Both are buried in Riverside Memorial Park.

W. Raleigh Thompson Sr. also worked for the City of Jacksonville as a milk inspector. He served twice in the US Navy from 1930-1943 and then again from 1950-1952. He married Lucille in 1933 and they had one son, W. Raleigh Thompson Jr., a year later. Thompson Sr. died in 1981 and is also buried in Riverside Memorial Park.

Dr. William Raleigh Thompson Jr. was described by his children as a "caring husband, father, grandfather & friend." He was raised in Mandarin and graduated from Landon High School, and then Emory University.

After graduation from college, Raleigh joined the U.S. Navy and became a flight officer. Following his service in the Navy, he attended Emory University School of Medicine. He & his family returned to the area in 1966 and settled in Orange Park. He opened his practice in 1968.

In the early 1970's, Dr. Thompson, Hinson L. Stephens & Thomas Hardin decided that Orange Park needed its own hospital. After years of planning Orange Park Community Hospital opened in 1974. Thompson served as Chief of the Medical Staff and President of Clay County Medical Association.



Dr. Thompson served as a mentor to many of the physicians who have practiced in Clay County. In 2023, After 59 years in Orange Park, he retired from medicine. He passed away in June of 2024 and is buried in Magnolia Cemetery next to his first wife Joanne Nelson Thompson.

As we look at the family tree, we have another multi-generation veteran family buried in Magnolia Cemetery. Starting with Dr. Thompson's Great, Great Grandfather, Samuel Jameson, who served in the Union Army during the Civil War, to his Great Uncle Lester Dowling who served in WWI and finally Dr. Thompson himself who served in the U.S. Navy after college but continued to be in the Reserves

rising to the rank of Lieutenant Commander and receiving the Navy and Marine Corp Commendation Medal for Meritorious Action in 1988.

We also can mention both his father and uncle who served in the military during WWII. Quite the military family and with Dr. Thompson, community service throughout his career as a physician in Orange Park.

### **The Carolyn Day Essay Contest for Clay County Students**

It's time again for our annual Veterans Day Essay Contest. This year, the contest has been renamed the **Carolyn Day Essay Contest** in honor of our dear friend, Carolyn Ann Day, who was the driving force behind the construction of our town's Veterans Memorial. The purpose of the contest is to give young people the opportunity to explore the importance of celebrating Veterans and Veterans Day.

Students submitting the winning essays will receive a certificate, a cash prize and be invited to read their essay at the Veterans Day Ceremony on November 11, 2025. Essay materials can be found on the Veterans Memorial page of our website, <https://ophistory.org/veterans-memorial>.



**Green House (Clarke Cottage) Renovation,** By Cindy Cheatwood

Things are going well with the restoration of the Clarke's worker cottage affectionately nicknamed the "Green House". Kitchen cabinetry has been installed and wallboards have been replaced. The flooring for the kitchen and bath is currently being completed. The windows that were removed have been restored and will be going back up any day now.



The interior painting is just beginning. For the exterior, it was decided that removing the asbestos siding should be done now. The siding beneath it is original to the house and mirrors that of the Clarke House. It will be painted white, as it was always white until Mrs. Clarke covered it with the asbestos siding "so she would never have to paint again".

A new handicap ramp has been constructed and looks great! A new kitchen door was made to coordinate with the original front door, which is being restored. The finish carpenters have done an amazing job. They remarked the interior walls of the cottage were constructed using a unique type of wood that can no longer be procured. They were amazed that once the wallboard was off the interior walls, this unique wood was in perfect condition. They ventured an estimate that it would cost over a million dollars to replace that wood because it is not available anywhere; it is no longer produced. Even the screen door on the front porch is being restored!

**Look For Us Online**

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

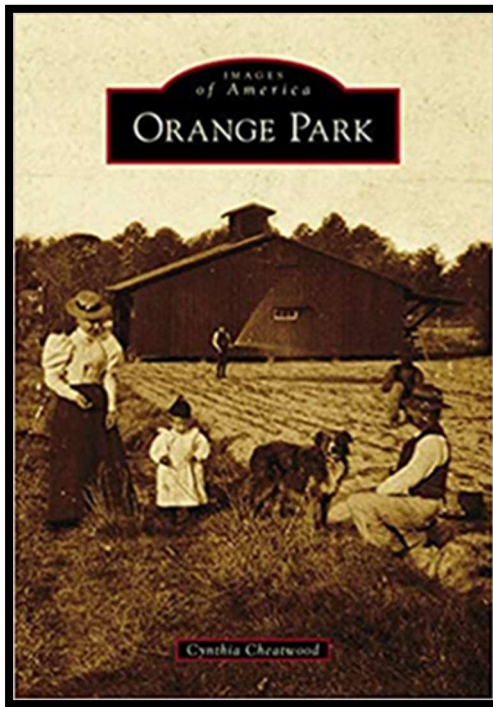
**Got pics?**

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](mailto: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

Historic Clarke House Tours are held the second Sunday of each month from 2 PM to 4 PM. A quiet Sunday afternoon is the perfect time for a leisurely tour of the house, both up- and downstairs. It's free and guided by members of the Historical Society of Orange Park. Private Guided Tours are available to homeschool, civic and social groups! To schedule a free guided tour, contact the Historical Society of Orange Park at [info@ophistory.org](mailto:info@ophistory.org). Groups will be scheduled based on the availability of guides.



Upcoming Open House Dates:

- August 9 - Free popsicles to celebrate Back-to-School
- September 13 - Grandparents Day- what a great way to step back in time with the grands! Clarke House will bring back warm memories of a time gone by.

## Links to Local History

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

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

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