The Historical Society of Orange Park

November 2026 Newsletter

Greetings, November! In addition to beautiful weather and cool temperatures, one of the highlights of November is Thanksgiving Day. This is our annual opportunity to slow down and remind ourselves of our many blessings and be grateful for them. As a Society, we are thankful for you, our members, who share a common desire to preserve and share local history with our community. We are also thankful for those that came before us and created this place we call our home. To celebrate our community, the Historical Society has several upcoming events for you to enjoy. In this issue of the newsletter, we highlight our monthly Clarke House open houses, our second attempt to host Moonlight on Magnolia (after it was postponed due to bad weather), and our Veterans Day Ceremony. We also share the stories of the Hellmuth House and one of the oldest veterans In Magnolia Cemetery.

We hope you enjoy the newsletter!

Calendar of Events

Date	Time	Event	Location
November 8, 2026	2:00 PM – 4:00 PM	Open House	Clarke House Park
November 11, 2026	11:00 AM – 12:00 PM	Veterans Day Ceremony	Veterans Memorial
November 14, 2026	3:00 PM – 6:00 PM	Moonlight on Magnolia	Magnolia Cemetery
December 12 & 13, 2026	5:00 PM – 9:00 PM	Hometown Holiday	Clarke House Park

Quarterly Member Meeting: An Armchair Tour of Some Special Orange Park Residents

On Monday, October 16, a Quarterly Meeting of the Society was held at the Orange Park Library. The first order of business was the election of officers for 2027. The following individuals were elected to serve:

President:	Cynthia Cheatwood
Vice President:	Bob Scallan
Secretary:	Vicki Lowe
Treasurer:	Sandra DiGiovanni

We are grateful to these individuals for their dedication and willingness to serve our organization.

Following the election, several presentations were made featuring local individuals. Sandra Digiovanni presented the stories of several African American veterans buried in Magnolia Cemetery. She related stories of their service, their time in Orange Park and their connections to our community. Sandra was followed by Van Hogan who shared the story of his grandparents, Allan and Mary Harrington, both long-

time Orange Park residents. After recounting how both Allan and Mary came to Orange Park, he shared the story of their lives in Orange Park and how they served their community. To end the program, Cindy Cheatwood played two videos. One described the life and contributions of Kathleen McKee, a native of England who served as a switchboard operator in World War I. Kathleen later married Louis McKee and settled in Clay County. The second video told the story of John Nelson, another long-time Orange Park resident and the namesake of Nelson Point.



Get the SCOOP…

The Historical Society continues to offer presentations at 9:00 AM, each Monday morning through November 16, for the Shepherd's Center of Orange Park (SCOOP). The presentations will be conducted at the Orange Park Methodist Church Family Life Center, 2042 Reed St., Orange Park, FL 32073. **Registration is required.** Please visit the Shepherd's Center of Orange Park's website at https://www.tscoop.org/ for more information. To register for the Historical Society's SCOOP presentations, and other Monday classes, visit https://www.tscoop.org/monday-classes/.

The topics below will be explored along with backstories that will illuminate and educate:

Date	***Topic***	**Presenter**
November 2	*Via Who? What You'll Love to Know about the Tisdelles*	Sandra DiGiovanni
November 9	*Orange Park's Monkey Farm*	Cynthia Cheatwood
November 16	*The Winter That Took the Orange Out of Orange Park*	Van Hogan

Moonlight on Magnolia – the Retake

Due to a terrible weather forecast before our scheduled historical walks through Magnolia Cemetery on October 24th, the event was rescheduled for November 14th. While the forecast was not correct, there is a silver lining. Because the date was pushed back, some of our participants were able to gather more things to share!



Join us Saturday, November 14th, for an even better experience. Because of the time change, the first tours will begin at 3:00 PM (instead of 4:00 PM), and the final tour will start around 5:00 PM (instead of 6:00 PM). If you're attending Moosehaven's Chili Cookoff between 10:00 AM to 4:00 PM that day, you can visit the cemetery after your chili adventure! As usual, free parking will be at the First Baptist Church and there is no charge to tour!

Veterans Day Ceremony



November 11 marks Veterans Day, a day that the Historical Society has honored and held sacred for many years through a solemn ceremony at Magnolia Cemetery.

We invite you to join us once again at 11:00 AM as we honor and recognize the men and women who have served our nation. This year's program will feature the NAS Jacksonville Color Guard presenting the colors, distinguished guest speakers, a commemorative flyover, performances by The First Coast Highlanders Bagpipes and Drums, readings of award-winning essays by local students, the VFW Post 250 Riders Flag Line, and the traditional closing of the ceremony with the playing of Taps.

A particularly meaningful part of our Veterans Day observance is the continued growth of the memorial plaza surrounding the monument. Each year, new inscribed pavers are added to honor veterans who have passed away during the previous year, as well as those whose service is being recognized for the first time. With every ceremony, the number of engraved names grows, creating a lasting record of service and sacrifice within our community.

Each paver bears a veteran's name, rank, and branch of service. Together, these inscriptions tell a powerful story of dedication, duty, and patriotism. They remind us that behind every name is an individual who answered the call to serve, often placing the needs of their country above their own. As the memorial expands year after year, it stands as a testament not only to those who wore the uniform, but also to our community's commitment to ensuring their service is never forgotten.

We invite you to walk among these tributes, reflect on the lives they represent, and join us as we pay homage to the generations of Americans who have defended our freedoms. This Veterans Day, let us come together in gratitude and remembrance to honor those who gave so selflessly of themselves in service to our nation.

Save the date: **Hometown Holiday in the Park**
December 12 and 13, 5:00 – 9:00 PM at Clarke Park



The Society can use your help decorating the Clarke House and the Clarke Cottage in advance of this annual event. This is a fun and creative opportunity. If you can help at some time between Dec 8 and 10, please let us know at info@ophistory.org. We will need plenty of fresh greenery, so if you have that on your property and can share it, please let us know.

The Town of Orange Park is offering a trail of lights in the forest and Santa's village, and Santa's workshop. Santa will be making an appearance, and kids will have the chance to get their picture made with him. Admission is free! Parking is free at the First Baptist Church of Orange Park. Tour the historic 1912 Clarke House, decorated in holiday style of the 1920's and 30's.

Time to Spruce Up the Garden

Exciting plans are underway to refresh the Clarke House's front landscape with a design that honors its historic character while reducing long-term maintenance. The Historical Society met with representatives of the Garden Club of Orange Park and UF/FAS Master Gardeners Volunteers, with suggestions from Dr. Wayne Hobbs, Clay County Horticulture Agent. Recommendations include clearing the existing planting bed, preserving only the most desirable plants, and using ground cloth and mulch to naturally suppress weeds before replanting this fall.

The proposed garden will feature a mix of heritage and native favorites. The design emphasizes year-round color, purposeful plant placement, and improved visibility for the site's historical marker.

Other advice included using pine mulch or pine straw, avoiding invasive species, and recruiting local high school volunteers in November to help with the project. The result will be a cleaner, more intentional landscape that reflects both the history and beauty of the property.

This will be a multi-stage process. We would love to have your help, no experience necessary. If you can join us for down and dirty Clarke House improvement, please let us know by contacting us at info@ophistory.org. We anticipate a November phase in advance of Hometown Holiday as well as a Spring phase before Carrie Clarke Day.



Orange Park Memories, By Cindy Cheatwood

Hellmuth House - 1454 River Road, Built 1905 or 1910



This house was designed by James Gurren, a local builder. A five-acre tract of Benjamin Stiles's former holdings was acquired in 1911 by Lincoln and Emma Spencer of Jacksonville who developed the houses at 1434 and 1454 River Road about 1913. The Spencers lived in Orange Park until about 1916, when they moved to Jacksonville. Lincoln was secretary of the Marshall and Spencer Company of Jacksonville, a building supply company.

The Spencers probably occupied the dwelling at 1434 River Road and developed this dwelling for rental property. and retained ownership of the two properties until 1917, when they divided their holdings, selling the house at 1454 River Road to John and Mayme Elton of Jacksonville. Elton, a real estate agent, also used the home as a seasonal and weekend retreat. He sold the residence about 1919 to Richard Sasnett, a native of Georgia who arrived in Jacksonville about 1917 and for a brief period operated a real estate company. Several years later, he moved to Orange Park.

Between 1913 and 1915, Spencer served as a commissioner on the Orange Park town commission, as town clerk in 1914, and between 1929 and 1931, he served as mayor of the town. About 1920, he built a second, smaller two-bedroom dwelling behind the house for his mother- in-law, Lucy Bophern. In 1919, Richard Sasnett, mayor of Orange Park from 1929-1932, made this his home.



The Florida Times-Union
Sun, Apr 12, 1959 Page 30

porch. Cpl. & baby. SP 1-2145.
ORANGE PARK—1454 River Road, 2 bedroom guest house, elec. kit. Tenant will have use of pool & dock. Married couple only. $100 mo. Open for Insp.
FOLAND & HIGBEE
317 W. Forsyth St. EL 4-8435

In 1963, John and Vera Hellmuth and their three sons purchased the house from Mr. McGiffen, the owner since 1946. It has been the Hellmuth family ever since. John was the owner of Culligan Water Service in Jacksonville and served as mayor of Orange Park. Vera was very involved in the Garden Club of Orange Park. They were members of Grace Episcopal Church for many years.

This 4000 sq. ft. home has 4 bedrooms, 3.5 baths on nearly two acres of waterfront. There is a 4-car garage and a 1500 sq. ft. addition that has a high-vaulted family room and modern kitchen. The addition was once home to the property caretaker and his wife.

Historical features in the home include original molding, handcrafted trim and authentic wood floors. Several brick fireplaces and an outdoor pool accent the seasons. The construction is heart pine from the frame to the floors. The original steam heat system was replaced by the Hellmuth family in the early 1990s. The original knob and tube electrical system, dating from the 1930s, is still in place though service in the house has been updated.

Veterans Corner, By Sandra DiGiovanni

This month we will be highlighting one of our oldest WWI veterans in Magnolia Cemetery. His name is Dewitt Talmadge Warner and he was 94 years old when he died in 1992. Our oldest WWI veteran is Travis MacNabb, he died at 102, but Travis never lived in Orange Park. Perhaps his story can be told another time. Dewitt Warner was born in 1898 in Holmes County, Mississippi. His early years were spent in Mississippi where he attended Mississippi A&M University during which he enlisted in the US Army during the final months of WWI.

By 1928 he was living in New York and had been working for the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) for five years. He married Lattra Donnelly in Brooklyn on December 19, 1928. Shortly after the marriage he and his wife sailed to Liverpool, England where he was to begin his service as a technical (immigration) advisor to the American Consulate in England. This was the first of many locations the family lived during his career with INS.

In 1935 he was transferred to Berlin in the same capacity and remained there until the start of WWII. His son John was born in Germany in 1937. While in Germany, Mr. Warner met Rudolph Hess and other high German officials and heard several of Hitler's speeches. He and his family were sent home in March of 1939 on the S.S. Manhattan. He was then sent to Miami where he spent a few years until his transfer to Mobile, Alabama in 1942. In 1943 he was promoted to Chief of Immigration and Naturalization Services in Mobile.

The family moved all over the United States and the world. From Charleston, South Carolina to California, his postings also included short stays in Austria & Czechoslavia (prior to WWII). His career with the INS was long and memorable.



By 1987 he was living in Jacksonville. His son might have been the reason for his final destination. He and his wife Lattra died within weeks of each other, Lattra on July 4, 1992, Dewitt on July 30, 1992. They can be found in Block 5, Lots 125 & 126, with their son John in Lot 127.

Clarke House/Cottage Open House Tours Have Begun!

With the renovation of Clarke Cottage complete, and the recent renovations made to Clarke House in September, both spaces are ready to welcome guests! On October 17th and 18th, both were open for tours for extra hours to make the property more accessible.

This two-structure tour will be our system going forward and so more volunteers are needed to cover both the locations. We will continue to open on the second Sunday of the month from 2-4 PM. If you are available for a turn now and then, please let us know at info@ophistory.org.

2027 Membership Offer

The Historical Society of Orange Park is offering these Early Bird Specials as part of our 2027 Membership Drive:

Renew or Join, now through December 31, 2026

- **Family Early Bird Specials** on annual 2027 Membership
  - Senior Family Membership: $15 (regularly $20)
  - Family Membership: $30 (regularly $35)
- Join (or Renew) at the regular rate, n**ow** and **your annual membership will be extended through December 31, 2027**.

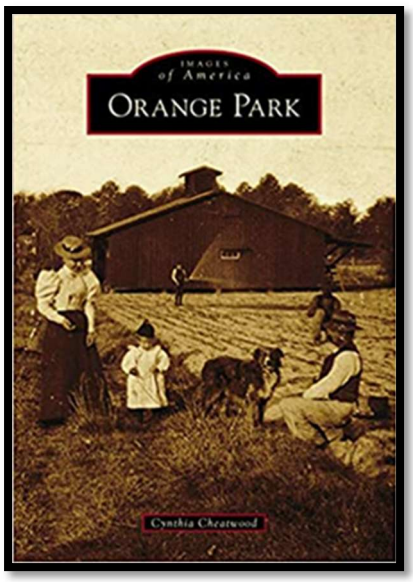


Click https://ophistory.org/join-us-store to take advantage of these end-of-year deals.

Look For Us Online

Look for the Historical Society of Orange Park online via our website, www.ophistory.org, our Instagram page, (https://www.instagram.com/historicalsocietyorangepark) or our Facebook page (https://www.facebook.com/search/top?q=historical%20society%20of%20orange%20park). Both sources provide updates on society news and activities.

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 and Clarke Cottage 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, and the cottage. 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. Groups will be scheduled based on the availability of guides.

Upcoming Open House Dates:

- November 8
- December 12 & 13 (Hometown Holiday)

Links to Local History

For more events, activities and information 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

Visit https://ophistory.org/local-interest for links to these organizations.

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