



The Historical Society of Orange Park

July 2025 Newsletter

This month we celebrate Independence Day and the 249th anniversary of our nation's founding. This is a uniquely American holiday and is observed with cookouts, concerts, summer fun and fireworks as we celebrate life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. As we celebrate, let us not forget the men that signed the Declaration of Independence and pledged their lives, their fortune and their sacred honor to a cause whose outcome was far from certain.



This Historical Society has been busy conducting tours, researching local history and working to honor our veterans. You may read about our efforts below in this newsletter.

If you wish to honor a veteran this year, please note that July 31st is the last day to place an order for an inscribed paver to recognize your veteran and have it placed at the Veteran's Memorial at Magnolia Cemetery prior to this year's Veterans Day Ceremony. Order forms are available at the Veterans Memorial at Magnolia Cemetery and on our website. Please visit www.ophistory.org and click on the Veterans Memorial page to download your order form.

Calendar of Events

Date	Time	Event	Location
July 13, 2025	2:00 PM – 4:00 PM	Open House	Clarke House
August 10, 2025	2:00 PM – 4:00 PM	Open House	Clarke House
September 14, 2025	2:00 PM – 4:00 PM	Open House	Clarke House
September 18, 2025	5:30 PM – 7:00 PM	Quarterly Member Meeting	Orange Park Library

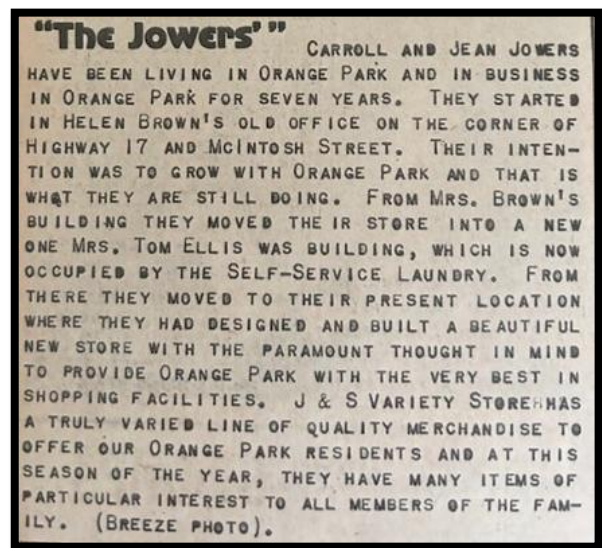
Orange Park Memories

On the first of each month in 2025, the Society is featuring local businesses, one old and one within the memories of many locals. This month we are featuring the Moss Factory and Jean Jowers' shop.

The Moss Factory at the Orange Park railroad tracks was an important local employer starting in the 1880s. Residents of all ages collected Spanish moss and delivered it to the site where it would be processed. The moss was boiled in fifty-gallon drums over an open fire to remove bugs and sap. It was dried and baled for shipping on the railroad. Northern factories used the moss in furniture, mattresses and for seats in cars and trains.



Jean Jowers was a much more modern business. Carroll and Jean Jowers started merchandising in Orange Park around 1952. They had a few locations over time. The most iconic is probably Jean Jowers' dress shop which thrived with the motto, "Fashion is a look, not a price."



Montclair Boys and Girls Club Tours Clarke Park

On June 25th, students from Montclair Elementary were given a guided tour of the Clarke House and Clarke Park, including visits to the shed, Green House and nature walk. It was a lovely day and the students represented their school well, asking questions and marveling at the artifacts. Some of these same students will join Betty Demmons and Society board members in July to take a stroll down McIntosh Avenue to learn the story of Orange Park's Black history from someone who literally walked that walk.

Celebrating Clay County Scout Camps



Camp Echokotee

On June 24th, the quarterly general meeting of the Historical Society included news, raffle drawings and a presentation on the history of the scout camps in Clay County.

The Boys Scouts of the Duval County Council created Camp Echokotee in 1922 with over 100 acres of waterfront on Doctors Lake. It started with one permanent building and seven camping areas for tents, pitched on concrete platforms. During the roaring 20's the park grew with more permanent buildings and recreational spaces including an aquatics area that was a true favorite.

The Girls Scouts of Duval County similarly created Camp Chowenwaw on the south shore of Black Creek near US 17 for camping purposes. This did not happen until 1932. By that time, the country was in the grips of the Great Depression. Building Chowenwaw was possible because the federal government needed a place to give jobs to folks during challenging times. 67 acres were purchased through \$250 in donations, each penny of which was accounted for in Girl Scout records.



Camp Chowenwaw

Both camps had a large activity building with an impressive fireplace. For Echokotee, 700 special bricks came from around the country and Canada. Bricks were chosen from special places like a silver mine in California, one from the home of Patrick Henry, a piece of marble from Mt. Rushmore, a stone from the home of Francis Scott Key and other historic places. For Camp Chowenwaw, its massive stone fireplace was made from the Swedish granite, originally used as ballast in 19th century sailing ships.

Both camps received significant support from the Kiwanis and Rotary Clubs in Jacksonville. At Chowenwaw, appreciation for the bathrooms donated by the Kiwanis led to the structures being called "Kiwasheses." Both camps took their names from native languages. Echokotee translates as "We are Brothers" and Chowenwaw means "Little Sister."

Many memories were shared during and after the meeting. Chuck Smithers shared an extensive collection of his scout memorabilia going back to the 1960s. He was a local Eagle Scout. Kathleen Colter shared her Girl Scout sash from that time. Cindy Cheatwood shared her Girl Scout troop leaders' jacket from the 1990s. All compared their badges.

The meeting also included a display of archival materials donated by the Jacksonville Historical Society, each one a treasure. The next general meeting will be held Sept. 17 at the Orange Park library.

Veteran Walks in Magnolia Cemetery

On May 7 and May 23, Sandra DiGiovanni led visitors on veteran-themed guided walks through Magnolia Cemetery. With persistence and determination, she has researched the locations of over 200 veterans who rest in the town's historic cemetery. In many cases there are no headstones that mark military service and many that have no marker at all at their site. Using town records and electronic genealogical sources, Sandra spent many long hours getting the correct information for the record. Sandra, who serves on the Cemetery Board for the Town of Orange Park as well as Vice President of the Historical Society, extends her dedication to veterans as our local Wreaths Across America coordinator. Her roles simultaneously serve the community and local veterans with equal attention to accuracy and respect.



For the May Veteran Walks, Sandra located the resting places of veterans without headstones and created signs to acknowledge their service. Someone anonymously placed a rose at each of these sites in heartfelt appreciation and acknowledgement of the service provided by these previously unknown and unrecognized veterans. Similar signs will be created for display leading up to Veterans Day. Each sign represents a long-needed recognition, thoughtfully researched, prepared and located. The Society is most appreciative of Sandra's efforts to honor those who served.

Sharing Clarke House and Magnolia Cemetery

On June 16th, the Historical Society of Orange Park played host to the First Baptist Church's Vacation Bible School. Fourteen teenagers, along with Reverend David Tarkington and Toni Sewell, were given a guided tour of the Clarke House and the Clarke property. These eager young people were excited and attentive during the tour. Questions were asked and a lot of stories were told about the contributions the Clarke family made in the early 20th century in Orange Park. From Sunday school classes on the screened porch, to the many meetings held in the parlor by groups still making a difference in the town. We were grateful to be able to spend time with this group and hope to continue these events in the future.

On June 18th, the Vacation Bible School visited Magnolia Cemetery. As a steward of the cemetery, Sandra DiGiovanni felt it was her responsibility to tag along with them and share some of the stories found in the cemetery.

After a brief history of the generous gift of the cemetery to the town by Washington Gano Benedict and A.P. Blake of Boston, the tour began. From Alice Gittens to Lawrence Hicks, the group was excited to learn their stories. We even surprised Toni Sewell with information about her great grandfather, Edward Alonzo Harrington.

Wanting to make the tour a little interactive, the students were tasked with locating veterans in the African American section of the cemetery. Each student then spoke the name, military branch and conflict for each of the 15 veterans identified. Learning about these veterans made the tour's final stop at the Veterans Memorial more meaningful.

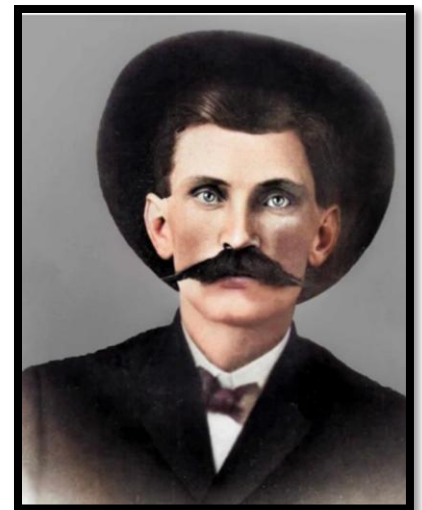
The Historical Society would like to again let our members and others know we are available for individual or group tours of both the Clarke House and Magnolia Cemetery.



Perils Faced by Early 20th Century Sheriffs

Many Clay County residents who are tuned into the history of the area are aware of the three sheriffs that lost their lives in the line of duty – Josephus Peeler, Charles Wilson, and Theodore Cherry. July marks the 112th anniversary of Sheriff Cherry's death and the 119th anniversary of Sheriff Wilson's death. In this issue, we will summarize those two tragic events.

On July 6th, 1913, Sheriff Cherry was feeling pretty good about himself. On the previous evening, a lynch mob, made up of residents from Bradford and Clay Counties, had gathered in Green Cove Springs to impose their justice on George Gray, who had been arrested for attacking a woman in Starke. During the night, Sheriff Cherry whisked Gray off to the Duval County jail for safe keeping and averted the lynching. Before dawn that Sunday morning, Cherry rode off in his buggy heading to Yellow Water (current day Maxville) to investigate rumors of gambling at a turpentine camp. Upon arrival, he was ambushed by a camp worker named Smith, taking a shotgun blast to the stomach. Within minutes, Sheriff Cherry was dead. Word of shooting spread like wildfire through Duval and Clay Counties. Seventy-five to one hundred men quickly gathered with rifles, shotguns, and pistols and began searching the woods for Smith. Some were on foot, some on horseback, others in buggies, and some were in cars. At 10:00 A.M. bloodhounds arrived on the scene. Around noon, Smith was caught. Some of the men gathered to hunt for Smith were from the lynch mob the night before, and as one may expect, they were agitated and looking for someone to hang. When questioned as to why he shot the sheriff, Smith's response was, "I don't know why I shot the sheriff, Boss. I guess I didn't know what I was doing. He didn't do anything to me. I had been drinkin' liquor, and I thought Sheriff Cherry was after me for stealing whiskey." With emotions running high, Smith was riddled with bullets.



Sheriff Theodore Cherry

This version of the event was captured from newspaper articles and other archival records of the time. However, the Cherry family, who kept an extensive collection of letters and other personal documents, feels this version is a bit inaccurate. The family knows that Sheriff Cherry had been investigating

intolerable conditions at the camp....low wages, unreasonable work conditions, run down shanties for homes, inadequate company store, workers not allowed to leave even on off time. They also know that white managers sent out a message to the sheriff....“If he ever comes back here, he won’t leave alive.” Although the killer, Smith, claimed he did not know why he killed Sheriff Cherry, it was obvious the killing was a planned ambush. Knowing the risk involved, Sheriff Cherry executed his duty intending to continue his investigation which resulted in the loss of his life.



Sheriff Charles Wilson

Sheriff Charles Wilson’s end of watch occurred on July 10th, 1906. The background story begins at another Clay County turpentine camp located in the southern part of the county. Camp worker, Will Bower, had been involved in domestic violence with his live-in companion. Having had enough of Bower’s abuse, she fled to another turpentine camp seeking employment. Bower was quick to catch up with her. After waving a gun at other camp workers who came to the young lady’s aid, the pair boarded the No. 84 train of the Atlantic Coast Line heading north from Crescent City to Palatka. The conductor was informed about the couple. Knowing Sheriff Wilson was onboard; he immediately informed him of the situation. Although out of his jurisdiction in Putnam County, Wilson was not one to shy away from enforcing the law. As Wilson entered a passenger car from the end, Bower and the woman entered simultaneously from the side door facing the depot platform. Standing face-to-face with in feet of each other,

Bower spotted the sheriff’s badge, drew his gun, and fired into Wilson. The sheriff collapsed and passengers went to his aid, but he took his last breaths on the floor. Bower panicked and ran down the aisle with passengers seated on both sides. Keep in mind, this is 1906. Clay County was still very remote and at times lawless. Most people carried weapons for their protection. One gun carrying passenger pulled his revolver and shot Bower as he exited the door back to the platform. He rolled off the platform coming to rest next to the tracks. His body lay there for 24 hours before the Putnam County Sheriff had him buried.

These events are a stark reminder of the perils faced by law enforcement officials every day. Their tireless efforts to maintain peace and protect the public often come at a high personal cost. As we honor the memories of these fallen heroes, let us also pledge our unwavering support to their families and colleagues who continue to serve with valor and dedication. May their sacrifices not be in vain and may their legacies inspire future generations to follow in their footsteps. Thank you to all the men and women in blue for your selfless service.

In Memoriam – Alice Grisham

Alice Grisham, a friend and former member of this historical society, passed away on June 16, 2025, in Orange Park, FL.

Alice graduated from the University of Florida with a degree in Art History. She became a teacher and taught at Wilkinson Elementary and Swimming Pen Creek Elementary Schools. Alice's love of children inspired her to author several children's books. One of Alice's joys was to dress in period costume and participate in our annual Carrie Clarke Day event. She never failed to make the event more festive with her presence.



Alice's funeral service was well attended. At the conclusion of her service, a processional traveled to the National Cemetery in North Jacksonville for final farewells.

Recognition, a Long Time Coming



Arthur Gilbert

Arthur Barnes Gilbert was just 18 years old when he experienced one of the most momentous events in American history. His life and the persona of the nation were changed forever on the solemn date, December 7, 1941. His story, just recently discovered by the Historical Society, reminds us to remember, to respect and to remain vigilant in defense of our freedom. It beckons us to remember those who secured those rights and humbly walked among us without expecting anything in return.

Enlisting in the US Navy on September 22, 1940, the Coddle Creek, North Carolina farm boy had no idea what laid ahead. Leaving his family, including four siblings, he must have envisioned an exciting journey, full of adventures in faraway seas, visiting exotic ports of call, each rife with new challenges and people not-at-all like his rural neighbors.

How excited Arthur Gilbert must have been when he learned he would serve in the beautiful tropics as a Seaman First Class on the *USS Arizona*! It was December of 1940 when he boarded the Pennsylvania-class battleship which had been recently reassigned from the Pacific Fleet to Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. It was to be part of Battleship Division One, alongside the *USS Pennsylvania*, the *USS California*, and the *USS Nevada*. After reaching the port, Gilbert and his shipmates helped implement upgrades including improved anti-aircraft guns and more powerful engines. His role onboard was to maintain vessel safety and to perform maintenance of the ship's operational readiness. In February, a new commanding officer, Captain Franklin B. Van Valkenburgh took the helm. At the time, the US Navy felt the battleships were safe from enemy attacks because the harbor was too shallow for torpedoes, and no one dreamed of a carrier-based aircraft attack on Hawaii.

On December 7, 1941, the Japanese launched a surprise attack on the US Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbor, resulting in the sinking of the *USS Arizona* and the loss of 1,177 sailors and Marines. Gilbert was rescued, along with 319 other sailors and 15 Marines. We don't know the details of that day. His experience appears to have never been recorded.

Two days after the attack on Pearl Harbor, Gilbert was assigned to the *USS Patterson*, a Bagley class destroyer. When taken on board the record shows his records went down with the *USS Arizona*. During his time on board, the *Patterson* served as a convoy for reinforcements. Later she continued to the Solomon Islands and Guadalcanal and patrolled around the Great Barrier Reef.

Aboard the *USS Indiana*, by 1944, Gilbert achieved the rank of CM2C, Carpenter's Mate, Second Class, a specialized rating within the Seabees, focusing on construction and maintenance. One might think he would have seen enough military life, but Gilbert continued to serve.

By 1947, he reached Petty Officer First Class, while serving aboard the *USS Tanner* which was engaged in hydrographic survey missions, mapping the ocean floor.

When America entered the Korean conflict, Arthur Gilbert was there. His record indicates he was ranked as DC1, responsible for maintaining and repairing damage control equipment and systems. His job was to ensure the safety and stability of ships during emergencies and to train personnel to conduct emergency repairs. The file for this period is labeled restricted so there was no further information about his Korean experience.

Arthur Gilbert left the Navy on June 6, 1956. When he died 17 years later, at the age of 50, his headstone did not include his veteran status. He had been married to his wife, Phyllis, for 25 years and had two sons, Ivan and Dennis. He died in Leon County, FL but is buried in Magnolia Cemetery in Orange Park.

The Historical Society investigated his story when Dennis Gilbert told us his father's grave had been overlooked when other veterans were recognized with flags for patriotic holidays. While this had been true for a long time, for the past few years the site has been so recognized. That is due to the diligence of Sandra DiGiovanni who researched every veteran in Magnolia Cemetery. She saw he was a veteran, but it wasn't until May 2025 that we were told of his World War Two service. The Society has researched his service and is applying for a veteran's marker to rest at the foot of Gilbert's gravesite. We will also install an inscribed paver recognizing him at the Veterans Memorial in Magnolia Cemetery.

As we head into the celebration of the Fourth of July, let us remember Arthur Gilbert and all who answered the call to service as he did. It is through such acts that America remains a free and democratic country.

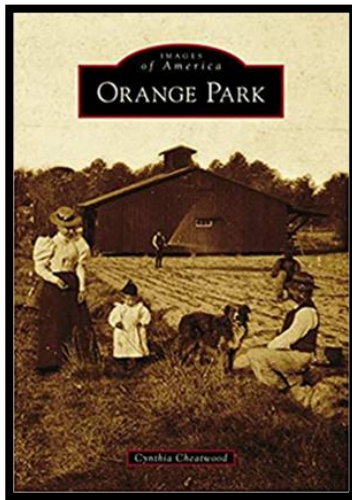
Veterans Memorial

Each year, we place one order for inscribed pavers to be installed at the Veterans Memorial. **The final day to place an order for an inscribed paver this year is July 31.** All pavers ordered by this date will be installed at the Veterans Memorial prior to this year's Veterans Day Ceremony in November. Paver order forms can be found on our website, www.ophistory.org, and at the Veterans Memorial. The gift of an inscribed paver is a wonderful way to honor those who have served and share their service with the community!



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

The Clarke House will be open to the public for tours on Sunday afternoon, July 13 from 2 PM to 4 PM. The Clarke House, built in 1912, served as the family home for William and Carrie Clarke for many years. It features hardwood floors, plastered 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. Stop by for a visit and make some memories of your own and feel free to share recollections that the house inspires.



Orange Park Historic Driving Tour



Looking for somewhere to explore or something to do in Clay County? Visit the Explore Clay website, [Explore Clay County - Small Towns, Big Passions](http://ExploreClayCounty-SmallTowns,BigPassions), for plenty of suggestions.

One of the activities is a tour of historic buildings in Orange Park. This driving tour takes you to 23 historical structures that hold positions of prominence in Orange Park's history and continue to serve today. *Please remember most locations are private residences and should be viewed from the street.*

To access the tour visit, download the Explore Clay mobile app from the Explore Clay website or by clicking: [Clay County - Mobile App](#). Once you have the app downloaded, search for the tour then dive into the rich history of Orange Park.

Private Guided Tours of Historic Clarke House and Magnolia Cemetery Available

Homeschool, civic and social groups are welcome to schedule a free guided tour of the 1912 historic Clarke House and/or Magnolia Cemetery. For more information, contact the Historical Society of Orange Park at info@ophistory.org. Groups will be scheduled based on the availability of guides.



Look For Us Online

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

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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