



The Historical Society of Orange Park

January 2025 Newsletter

As we begin 2025, the Historical Society is looking forward to another good year. Last year ended on a good note as we celebrated Christmas in style at Clarke House Park. We are busy planning and preparing for our first big event of the year, our annual Carrie Clarke day celebration. This year's event will be held Saturday, March 8, at Clarke House Park. Please check our website, our Facebook page and future newsletters for more information as plans are finalized.

The start of the new year also means that it is time to renew your membership if you have not done so already. You can renew your membership via our website or by utilizing the form attached to this newsletter. Please know that we greatly appreciate your support and participation.

Calendar of Events

Date	Time	Event	Location
January 12, 2025	2:00 PM – 4:00 PM	Open House	Clarke House
February 9, 2025	2:00 PM – 4:00 PM	Open House	Clarke House
March 8, 2025	11:00 AM – 4:00 PM	Carrie Clarke Day	Clarke House Park
March 9, 2025	2:00 PM – 4:00 PM	Open House	Clarke House

Hometown Holiday

Families filled Clarke House Park on the evenings of Friday, December 6 and Saturday, December 7 for Hometown Holiday. This annual event is a festive way to celebrate the Christmas season.

Outdoor activities included live musical entertainment, food vendors, pictures with Santa, a Christmas village and trail rides through the trees on trails decorated with holiday lights.

The Clarke House was decorated for Christmas and received many visitors both evenings. Members of the Society were on hand to welcome guests and answer questions about the house, the Clarke family and Orange Park history. While adults looked over the artifacts in the house, children played with the collection of wooden toys under the Christmas tree. Visitors also had the opportunity to learn about Vicki, a chimpanzee from the Yerkes Laboratory that was brought to live at the Clarke property in the late 1940's by researchers, Keith and Kathy Hayes. An enjoyable time was had by everyone.



HSOP Holiday Member Gathering

On the evening of December 14th at 6 PM, members of the Society gathered at the Clarke House for fun, food and fellowship. Everyone brought a dessert to share and cakes, pies and cookies were in abundance. We also collected food for those in need that was delivered to the Clothes Closet. One of the highlights of the evening

was a trivia game hosted by Society President, Cindy Cheatwood. Those gathered formed teams to collaborate on the answers to a variety of questions on general trivia with a strong focus on Orange Park history. The result was a little learning and a lot of laughter. It was a wonderful way to spend a December evening!



Wreaths Across America



Wreath Day 2024 on December 14, was an amazing event. Guests were welcomed by event organizer, Sandra DiGiovanni. HSOP President, Cindy Cheatwood, provided opening remarks. Next, Ken White, from American Legion Post #250 Riders, facilitated the ceremonial wreath presentation. Wreaths were placed at the memorial honoring those who have served in the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines, Space Force, Coast Guard, and Merchant Marine. An additional wreath was placed to honor our service

members classified as POW/MIA.

Public participation was up and we were able to have three groups placing wreaths in Magnolia Cemetery that included members of the Rotary Club Orange Park Sunrise, Councilman Doug Benefield of Elevated CPA with his family and staff, and local individuals who wanted to participate in honoring our local veterans.

Vice Mayor Winnette Sandlin oversaw the placement of wreaths in Moosehaven Cemetery by Cub Scout Pack 25. They did an excellent job.



Additional local youth groups, Boy Scout Troop 25, Girl Scout Troop 31020 and the Black Creek Young Marines were part of our ceremony and contributed by placing wreaths in Magnolia Cemetery.

A total of 225 wreaths were placed in Magnolia Cemetery this year, up from 200 wreaths placed last year, with 35 wreaths placed in Moosehaven Cemetery. We are grateful for the growing support. This year's event was a great success and we look forward to seeing everyone again this year on Saturday, December 13, 2025.



Orange Park Memories

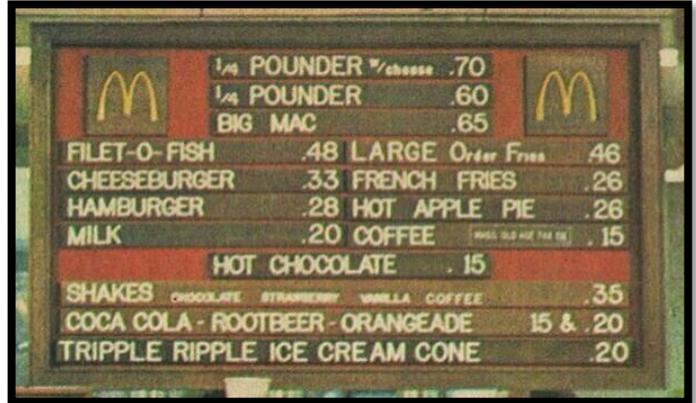
As we move into 2025, the Historical Society would like to highlight Orange Park businesses. Each month we will share stories of one very old and one more familiar business in the town.

One of the first public businesses in Orange Park was Sabin and Evans Store, established in 1881 on Kingsley Avenue. It had two buildings (pictured), one offering necessities, the other offering luxuries like dry goods and “gents furnishings.” They also housed the post office, drawing customers daily. (Note the cross-sections of well-worn paths from different directions)

More familiarly, the McDonalds on Park Ave, has been in the town for 50 years. It was the first McDonalds in Clay County, opening in 1974. The store embraces its history, keeping the original design even when doing a major uplift years ago. They also sponsor this Society in its efforts to appreciate local history.



Kingsley Ave., circa 1888



McDonalds menu, 1974

Local News and Activities



Our thanks to the Town of Orange Park for installing new timber decking on the small deck and steps at the rear of the Clarke House. The old decking was very weathered. The new decking looks great, is sturdy and is much appreciated.

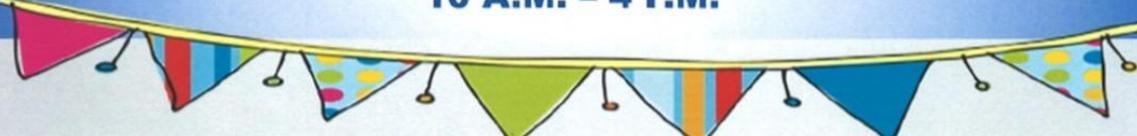


We are proud to report that Michael Maxfield recently attained the rank of Eagle Scout. Michael's Eagle Scout Service Project was the reconstruction of the decorative well house behind the Clarke House. Michael and his crew did an excellent job. Michael is pictured here with HSOP Vice President Sandra DiGiovanni and HSOP President Cindy Cheatwood.



JOIN US FOR A HISTORY BOOK FAIR
Monday – President’s Day - FEB. 17, 2025
10 A.M. – 4 P.M.

Meet authors like Jeff Davies (Florida: A History in Pictures), Johnathan Rich (Spires in the Sun), Cindy Cheatwood (Orange Park: Images of America), Linda Schilling Mitchell (My Color-Full Florida) Randy Harris (Turpentown) and many others.



- **MUSEUM TOURS**
- **SCAVENGER HUNTS**
- **BOOK SIGNINGS**
- **REENACTMENTS**
- **DIGITAL PRESENTATIONS**

This event is free and open to the public
Presented by the Clerk of Court’s
Historical Archives Division
and Clay County Historical Society
Location – 915 Walnut St.
(the Historic Triangle)
Green Cove Springs, FL 32043
ClayCountyHistoricalSociety.org
Info@ClayCountyHistoricalSociety.org



Orange Park History on Channel 4 on February 4th

Channel 4 news reached out to the Society Dec. 16th, wanting to conduct an interview about the town's history. Tiffany Salameh, Consumer Investigative Reporter for WJXT, met Cindy Cheatwood at the Clarke House where the interview was filmed. Two days later WJXT's Scott Johnson contacted the Society for another interview, this one about the Monkey Farm. That was also done inside Clarke House.

Ms. Salameh will be hosting live shows in Orange Park from 7-9 AM and 4-7 PM on February 4. Presumably, clips from the pre-recorded interviews with Cindy Cheatwood will be integrated into the live shows. We don't know what the result will look like, but it is good to have folks interested in Orange Park history!

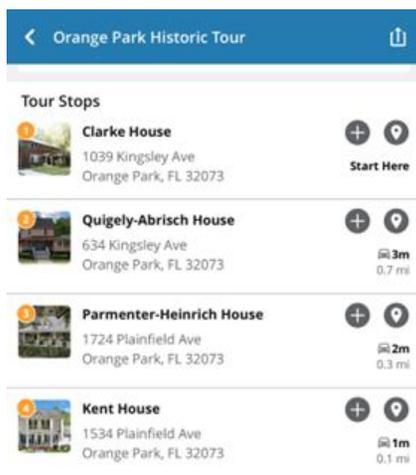


Orange Park Historic Driving Tour



Looking for somewhere to explore or something to do in Clay County? Visit the Explore Clay website, [Explore Clay County - Small Towns, Big Passions](#), 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.

The Winter That Took the Orange Out of Orange Park

The Freezes of December 1894 and February 1895

The winter of 1894 – 1895 left a lasting impact on the small town of Orange Park and much of Florida. The combination of two severe freezes, collectively called, “The Big One,” affected the fortunes of many across Florida and impacted the growth of Orange Park for decades. The damage was so severe due to the devastation of the region’s primary crop, oranges.

It is well known that, among citrus trees, orange trees are more delicate than most. They thrive in warm weather and do not tolerate cold well. A new orange tree takes 3 – 4 years to begin producing fruit and 6 – 7 years to reach its full production. They need sustained warm weather to survive and thrive.

Florida has long been seen as a place that is conducive to growing oranges. Oranges were originally imported here by Spanish settlers in the 1500s. Orange trees thrived here, in what was an unusually warm period, up until the early 1800s. St. Augustine was described as “a large orange grove” and local planters such as Zephaniah Kingsley at Laurel Grove and Francisco Fatio at New Switzerland maintained large orange groves.

In 1835, a severe freeze brought an end to the extended warm weather and destroyed many orange trees. The cultivation of orange trees in this area suffered a serious setback. However, by 1850, planters in the region decided that the Freeze of 1835 was just an unusual occurrence and began cultivating oranges again.

With the end of the Civil War, the plantation economy collapsed, and land values dropped. Northerners seeking milder temperatures began to move to Florida. Some of the early post-war settlers, such as Harriett Beecher Stowe, began writing about the benefits of Florida’s warm climate and virtues of the orange. With the cultivation of oranges somewhat limited to Florida and ready markets in northern cities, oranges began to be seen as a very profitable and reliable cash crop. This led to an influx of wealthy northerners moving to Florida in the 1870s and 1880s to take advantage of the available land and warm climate.



A riverboat approaches an orange packing facility in Palatka.

Several factors combined to enhance the cultivation of oranges in Florida. In addition to ready markets in northern cities, plenty of available land and a warm climate, transportation in the area was improving. Steamboats plied the St. Johns River and its tributaries. Railroads expanded into the interior of the state opening more land for cultivation. This reliable transportation meant that fresh fruit could be quickly delivered to northern markets. Marketing efforts also improved, which enhanced demand. Orange Fever began to infect the new Florida settlers.



Orange Park Orange Grove

As Orange Fever took hold, developers began to publish brochures and articles promoting oranges as a stable crop producing a steady income. Communities sprang up across Florida with names such as Mandarin, Orangedale, Satsuma, Citra and Orange Heights. One of these communities was Orange Park. Its founder, Washington G. Benedict, promoted orange farming as a lucrative investment. He attracted many residents to the town with almost everyone maintaining a grove of some size and profiting from the sale of oranges.

of 1894 – 1895 changed that. With little warning and less protection, two untimely, severe freezes combined to decimate the major regional cash crop.

The first freeze occurred on December 29 – 30, 1894. Temperatures in the area dropped to 14° F. Most of the year's orange crop was still on the trees. Within hours, the orange crop was destroyed. Fortunately, the orange trees themselves were dormant and most survived the freeze.

The December freeze was followed by 5 weeks of warm, wet weather, just what the orange trees needed to recover. The trees emerged from their dormant state, sap began to rise, and new growth began to appear. Hopes for a recovery looked good.

Unfortunately, a second severe freeze occurred on February 8 – 9. The temperature in the area once again fell to 14° F. The orange trees, full of sap, began to freeze. As the sap froze, it expanded, splitting the limbs and trunks of the trees, killing them to the ground. The December freeze destroyed the orange crop but the February freeze destroyed the orange trees. It would take years to recover.

In Orange Park and across the state, residents who had seen oranges as a stable, profitable investment, lost everything. Many abandoned their homes and farms and moved back north. Others moved farther south and tried to start again.



The orange crop was destroyed by the December freeze. The trees were killed by the February freeze.

The devastation of the orange industry was extensive. It was as if an entire industry had shut down overnight. Farm workers, box factories, packing houses and transportation companies suddenly had no market. Due to a lack of paying customers, many merchants went out of business, banks failed, and towns disappeared.

Orange Park was fortunate in that the town survived. The commercial production of oranges no longer played a significant role in the local economy. In the space of a few hours, the trajectory of the town had changed. The Orange had been taken out of Orange Park and the town grew slowly for the next several decades. However, the Town of Orange Park is resilient. Through patience, persistence and economic diversification, the town once again became a thriving community.

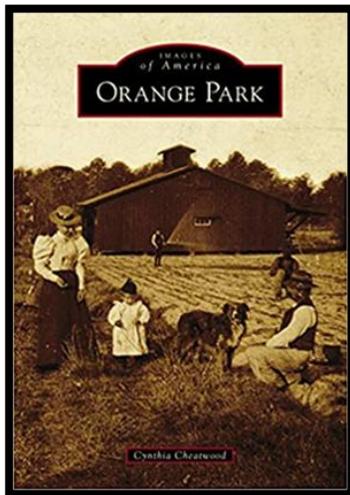
Sources:

A History of Florida Citrus Freezes, John A. Attaway, Ph.D.
Florida Oranges: A Colorful History, Erin Thursby
Images of America: Orange Park, Cynthia Cheatwood
The Citrus Industry in the Sunshine State, Brian Weaver and
Richard Weaver
Palmetto Leaves, Harriett Beecher Stowe

Parade of Memories, Arch Fredric Blakey
Kevin Hooper Photograph Collection
Florida Memory Project
The Florida Times-Union
Mary Jo McTammany
Charity Monroe

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, January 12 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.



Look For Us on 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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McDonald's, 428 Park Avenue & 372 Blanding Blvd.,
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[Home | Orange Park Histor 1
\(orangeparkhistorytours.com\)](http://orangeparkhistorytours.com)





Historical Society of Orange Park, Inc.

P.O. Box 08
 Orange Park, FL 32067

2025 Membership Enrollment Form

Member Renewal

New Member

Name (s): _____

Address: _____

Telephone: _____

E-mail Address: _____

<u>Category</u>	<u>Number</u>		<u>Dues</u>	<u>Total</u>
Individual	_____	X	\$20	_____
Family	_____	X	\$35	_____
Senior (65 and over)	_____	X	\$10	_____
Student	_____	X	\$10	_____
Corporate	_____	X	\$50	_____
Additional Donation				_____
Total				_____

Dues can be paid either in person at the monthly meetings, online via our website, <https://ophistory.org/store>, or by mail. Please make checks payable to the **Historical Society of Orange Park** and send to:

Historical Society of Orange Park
 P.O. Box 08
 Orange Park, FL 32067

We appreciate your support!

www.ophistory.org