



# The Historical Society of Orange Park

## September 2023 Newsletter

We ended August the way we began last November, with the close approach of a hurricane. Once again, we were extremely fortunate that we missed the worst of the storm. We extend our prayers for healing, patience, resilience and strength to our friends in the Big Bend area and eastern Panhandle as they begin the process of recovery.

September is here and with it comes the last, hopefully, of our 90+ degree days. The long-awaited first day of fall will be September 23. This month, we will end summer by hosting our outing to the Florida Agricultural Museum. Fall, in addition to beautiful weather, brings the Historical Society's busiest time of the year. In relatively quick succession we will host or participate in Fall Festival, Moonlight on Magnolia, Veterans Day and Hometown Holiday. Volunteers will be needed (and appreciated) for all these activities so if you have some free time please consider helping out.

On September 11, we observe Patriots Day, a day that remembers the terrible day when terrorists hijacked four aircraft, crashing two into the World Trade Center in New York, one into the Pentagon in Washington and one into a field in Pennsylvania as passengers fought to regain control of the plane. As we reflect on the terrible events that took place on that day in 2001, please take time to commemorate the almost 3,000 people that died in the attacks, honor the many first responders that ran toward danger and celebrate the ordinary citizens, from all walks of life, that aided the wounded, searched the rubble and comforted the grieving. A very diverse America came together as one that day.



### Calendar of Events

Date	Time	Event	Location
September 10, 2023	2:00 PM – 4:00 PM	Open House	Clarke House
September 16, 2023	9:30 AM – 3:00 PM	Outing	Florida Agricultural Museum
October 8, 2023	2:00 PM – 4:00 PM	Open House	Clarke House
October 21 & 22, 2023	10:00 AM – 5:00 PM	Fall Festival	Town Hall Park
October 28, 2023	4:00 PM – 7:00 PM	Moonlight on Magnolia	Magnolia Cemetery
November 11, 2023	11:00 AM – 12:00 PM	Veterans Day Ceremony	Veterans Memorial
November 12, 2023	2:00 PM – 4:00 PM	Open House	Clarke House

Read on for additional information on these events and other activities.

### **ROAD TRIP!!! - Outing to the Florida Agricultural Museum**

Florida Agricultural Museum, here we come!

On September 16<sup>th</sup> we will gather in the parking lot of Town Hall at 9:30 AM to carpool to Palm Coast (or you can meet us there). Then, we're off to visit the Florida Agricultural Museum to tour buildings dating from 1880 to 1920 which all have been relocated to the Museum from areas across the state. The buildings include a fully stocked 1800's general store, five buildings from a citrus complex, a 1920's dairy barn and a brief wagon ride to an authentic Florida Cracker Homestead built in 1880. Along the tour we will even encounter rare heritage Florida Cracker Livestock.



The tour is about 1.5 hours and costs \$12. After our tour we will find a good lunch spot and enjoy good conversation.



### **Recognizing Local Altruism**

On August 7<sup>th</sup>, Cindy Cheatwood presented *Good Neighbors: Orange Park's History of Helping* at the Orange Park branch library for the Society's August general meeting.

Throughout the town's history, groups have organized to help make our small town better. Starting with the Orange Park Woman's Club in 1910, the community has benefited in ways large and small. The Woman's Club adopted hygiene and health concerns for the town by providing necessities for school children and establishing trash collection barrels around town. They helped with a malaria outbreak, assisted with hospital care and to this day continue to support those in need locally and beyond.

For decades, the Garden Club of Orange Park has beautified public spaces around town, sponsored gardening projects for kids and assisted with activities of this Society. Similarly, the Lions Club of Orange Park, established in 1948, has provided eye exams and glasses to generations of the town's kids.

The Clothes Closet and Food Pantry of Orange Park was recognized as well. Since 1948, this nonprofit has worked tirelessly for the town's less fortunate. Last year they served over 3,000 households!

The Art Guild of Orange Park, now 50 years old, has added an artistic touch to Town Hall Park with state symbol panels and the mural on the town's water tank. They also offer scholarships to students and assist other nonprofits in a delightfully colorful way.

Efforts of the Rotary Club of Orange Park date back to 1969. Their community service to our area is diverse and often overlooked. They sponsor scholarships for students, support local law enforcement and provide for medical resources as far away as Haiti.

Newer organizations like the Shepherd's Center, BASCA and the Senior Center carry on the giving tradition of the town's early residents. Seeking to help people who can be lost in the shuffle of larger groups, these organizations provide much needed support for the elderly and disadvantaged. The James Boys bicycle and wheelchair ramp ministry have likewise been providing much needed services since 1998, building over 50 ramps and donating over 500 bikes in 2022 alone!

We in the Historical Society appreciate and applaud all these efforts. Each year an award is presented to bring attention to an individual or group who has served the community through activities with the Society. If you know of someone who should be considered for this award, let us know at [info@ophistory.org](mailto:info@ophistory.org).

### **Orange Park Memories: September: 1990s**

The Historical Society of Orange Park is celebrating 20 years of history in our town by posting monthly Facebook messages throughout 2023 to highlight the town's history, decade by decade. This month we look at the 1990s.

Orange Park reached its population peak in 1990, when its population was 9,471. The Town bought the Clarke Pecan Grove property in 1991, creating Clarke House Park and paving the way for decades of fun for all ages. A Historical Survey of the town's notably historic properties was conducted in 1994 by Mary Anne Study and the Orange Park Woman's Club. In 1997 they created the River Road Historic District. They led the effort to have the Clarke House listed on the National Register for Historic Homes in 1998. In 1995, Mayor Earl Harrington installed a time capsule as a new Town Hall was dedicated. Benevolent organizations, BASCA and the Shepherd's Center

were established. The original Grumpy's Restaurant opened in 1999, a dream of a US NAVY cook called Chef Grumpy, "The Bad Mood Dude".



Mayor Earl Harrington and the Orange Park Time Capsule



Plaque for the new Town Hall



The Shepherd Center



BASCA

## Veterans Memorial Updates

### Status of New Paver Orders for 2023:

The Veterans Memorial Committee has now processed a purchase order for all new paver requests received by August 8, 2023. The engraving company has given us a shipment timeframe of mid to late September. Once received, our installation company will put down all the new pavers in October. All paver orders received going forward will be consolidated into a single purchase in August of 2024.

**Status of Paver Renovation Project Fundraising :**

In our latest newsletter we had put out a “call for help” in attaining the target of raising \$15,000 to fund the renovation of the Veterans Memorial as we were \$551.58 short of reaching the goal. The presentation at our August general membership meeting was: “Good Neighbors: Orange Parks history of helping”.

After the presentation, Mr Kenny Radwanski addressed the assembly and committed to donate the entire balance needed to finally achieve our goal of completely paying for the renovation project! He truly represented the spirit of that night’s theme: when neighbors help neighbors and their community, everybody wins! The entire community thanks Kenny for this amazing donation. It is greatly appreciated.



**Veterans Day 2023:**

It is not too early to mark your calendars for the annual Veterans Day Wreath Laying Ceremony. We invite you to join us for this important event on November 11, 2023 at 11 AM.

The program for this years ceremony will include the wreath laying by the Mayor of Orange Park accompanied by our keynote speaker Mr. Ed Turner, Executive Director of the National POW/MIA Memorial and Museum. A highlight of the program will include local students who will read their winning entries in the Society’s 2023 Veterans Day Essay Contest.

The ceremony will begin promptly at 11 AM and last about 1 hour. At the conclusion of the ceremony everyone is invited to share refreshments at the historic Clarke House.

**A Veterans Story:**

It is appropriate that we remember Captain Scott Speicher this month as September 15th is National POW/MIA Recognition Day.

Michael Scott Speicher of Orange Park was assigned to Strike Fighter Squadron 106 while flying the F/A 18 Hornet based at Cecil Field.

Deploying with his Squadron to VFA-81 aboard the Aircraft Carrier USS Saratoga to the Persian Gulf, Captain Speicher was shot down on January 17, 1991 while flying a mission over



Iraq on the first day of Operation Desert Storm . Over the years between his jet going down and the return of his remains in 2009, Captain Speicher was listed over time as MIA, POW, KIABNR, and ultimately KIA. We can only imagine what friends and family endured during this period of uncertainty. Captain Speicher was a Naval Aviator that gave the ultimate sacrifice for his country. The Historical Society will place an engraved paver in his honor at the Veterans Memorial.

### **Veterans Day Essay Contest**

With the start of a new school year just a few days away, we want to take this opportunity to invite all Clay County students to participate in this year’s Veterans Day Essay Contest. Clay County students from 4<sup>th</sup> grade through 12<sup>th</sup> grade are invited to submit an essay on a topic related to Veterans Day.

The topics are as follows:

<u>Grade Level</u>	<u>Word Limits:</u>	<u>Prize Offered</u>	<u>Prompt</u>
4th –6th	300-500	\$50	What is Veterans Day?
7th –8th	400-700	\$75	Why do veterans deserve our support, respect and understanding?
9th -12th	500-1000	\$100	Why are the words “Duty, Honor, Country” important today?

Essays must be received no later than September 30, 2023. The student submitting the winning essay in each category will receive a cash prize and be invited to present their essay at the Veterans Day Ceremony, 11 AM, Saturday, November 11 at the Veterans Memorial in Magnolia Cemetery.

Entry forms and contest instructions can be downloaded by clicking the following link: [Veterans Day Essay Contest 2023.pdf \(wsimg.com\)](#) or by visiting the Veterans Memorial page of our website, [Veterans Memorial \(ophistory.org\)](#).

### **Town of Orange Park Fall Festival**

The Town of Orange Park will host the 41st Annual Orange Park Fall Festival on Saturday, October 21 and Sunday, October 22, from 10 AM to 5 PM each day! The event features two full days of music, food, fun, crafts, vendors, kid’s activities and live entertainment! Admission is free! This event is extremely popular so parking nearby is always a challenge. To facilitate access to the event, the Town has arranged for parking at



Moosehaven with free shuttle service running throughout the day.

The Society will be hosting a booth at our usual location directly behind Town Hall, across from the gazebo to share our local history through various artifacts and displays as well as spread the word about upcoming events such as Moonlight on Magnolia and the Veterans Day Ceremony. Volunteers are needed to help us man the booth on Oct. 21<sup>st</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup>. If you can spare a few hours to help out, please email us at [info@ophistory.org](mailto:info@ophistory.org) and let us know the times and dates you are available.

### **Moonlight on Magnolia Returns October 28th!**

Public interest in the annual historical guided walks through Magnolia Cemetery remains high. We are scheduled for October 28<sup>th</sup> from 4-7 PM and we need volunteers! There are acting parts available for those interested in presenting local characters to visitors. We also need folks to escort groups around as guides. There is a script to use as a guide and each guide can choose their outfit! We also need help with logistics- especially at the starting point where we need folks to man tables and help organize folks into equally populated groups.

Plans are being formed to create a slightly easier guiding experience. There are so many interesting people buried in Magnolia that telling all their stories to each tour group is just not practical. Therefore, we will have shorter scripted guided walks that will encourage visitors to make independent stops at some areas after their official tour concludes. The tour guide will briefly point out personalities that are not convenient for the group to hear during the guided part of the tour. The guests can then get an idea as to which speaker they might want to return to at the end of their guided walk.



We are happy to share more details if you like. To learn more or to help with any of these activities, please send an email to [info@ophistory.org](mailto:info@ophistory.org) letting us know what you can help with. Please include your preferred activity, the time you are available and your contact information. Thank you for considering this!

## **Orange Park Memory: Meet Walter Guy Odum-Orange Park's Longest-Serving Mayor**

By Cindy Cheatwood



In the county's historical text, *Parade of Memories*, Arch Blakey says that Walter Odum and Hoyt Cotney deserve much of the credit for Orange Park retaining its small town charm in the 1960s. The statement is intriguing. In the course of preparing the Facebook posts for the Society's anniversary, the name Walter Odum showed up in various places. It had only ever been on a list of mayors and given little attention, but now seemed to cry out for recognition. The Clay Archives was consulted but they only had one picture of Odum,

taken when he served on the County Commission and that served to magnify the mystery further. It was not until the generous gift of a *Breeze* newspaper collection came to the Society that Mr. Odum's story began to unfold. It seems fitting that we introduce newer "Orange Parkers" to this amazing man.

Walter Guy Odom was born in rural Glennville, (Tatnall County) Georgia on Sept. 14, 1915, to Arsula Viola (Weathers) Odum and John Robert (Robbie Odum), both of Tatnall County. He had 12 siblings.

On May 9, 1946, the 29-year-old Odum married Lela May Jennings, granddaughter of Florida Governor William S. Jennings, and moved to Florida. He started the Florida Soap Company in Doctors Inlet soon after arriving and within a very few years started Clay Oil to manage at the same time. He would lead that company until his death. Later he also established Odom Marketing in Doctor's Inlet. He was also a consultant for soap and chemical companies in Winter Park and Tampa.

Almost as soon as Odum arrived in Orange Park he took great interest in city government. Starting in 1948, he served on the Orange Park Town Commission (as the Town Council was then called) from 1948-1966. This was the time before the new town charter (1975) set the mayoral term as one-year. He served for eighteen straight years before health issues interrupted his tenure. He served almost twenty years on the Clay County Commission, now called BCC.

In addition to his business and local government enterprises, Odum was a member of several local groups including the Orange Park Rotary Club, Orange Park Lions Club, and Clay County Chamber of Commerce. He was also a member of Orange Park United Methodist Church.

In 1962, the Yerkes Laboratories of Primate Biology Inc. was talking about leaving Orange Park. According to the *Jax Public Record* of March 5, 2012, "that would have an adverse effect upon Clay County and Orange Park, said Walter G. Odum, mayor of the town and chairman of the Board of County Commissioners." An official of Emory University publicly said a study of the relocation was under way.

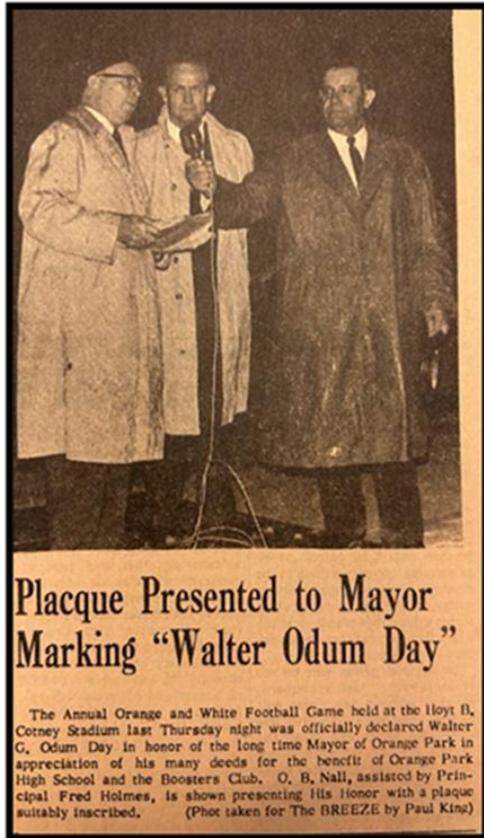
"Odum said he was ordering a study of the economic factors involved, should the laboratory be taken from Orange Park. Results of the study would be forwarded to U.S. Reps. Charles Bennett and D.R. Matthews and Sen. George Smathers of Florida. "It is the only real industry in Orange Park and it has a tremendous impact on this community," Odum said.

Besides the facility's local purchases and payroll to employees, Odum said an "above average caliber of personnel" was employed at Yerkes and "they are a welcome addition to any area."

Odum said if the relocation plan was adopted, Orange Park's only recourse would be to attempt to head off the action through congressional contacts. Yerkes received a large sum of money from the National Institutes of Health, a federal agency, which could be influenced congressionally, he said."

In spite of these efforts, the Yerkes facility was moved to Atlanta. According to [Donald A. Dewsbury](#), author of *Monkey Farm, A History of the Yerkes Laboratories of Primate Biology, Orange Park, Florida, 1930-1965*, Bennett and Matthews took the case to Washington, saying Orange Park was already so economically depressed that closing the laboratories would be harmful. Jacksonville University tried to absorb the operation in support to no avail. Odum had done all he could.

In 1964, Walter Odum, mayor of Orange Park was appointed to serve on the Clay County Board of Commissioners by Governor Farris Bryant. This was a repeat service as Odum had been on the commission and left for health reasons. Bryant had filled that vacancy with Louis Huntley who then won election to the state legislature and resigned from the Board of Commissioners. So Odum was back.



4.03.1964 *Breeze*, p1

In 1963, Odum assumed the role as president of the Bank of Orange Park, having taken over when the bank's 1959 founder, E. B. MacDonald resigned. An issue of conflict of interest arose in March 1963. Some questioned if state statute prohibited Odom from working at the bank while simultaneously working for a municipality. To avoid conflict and any potential problems for the Town, he submitted his resignation. However, the Town Commission (aka Council) disagreed with that interpretation and would not accept Odom's resignation, so as the *Breeze* put it, Mr. Odom was still Mayor, whether he wants to be or not." Mr. Odom continued work at the bank, which later became Southeast Bank and finally ceased operations around 1981.

Long-time area resident, Carol Hogan remembers seeing Odum come in regularly at Mrs. O'Kelly's tea room for lunch. Her ten-year-old's memory of him is that of a very distinguished gentleman, always nicely dressed and polite. For his support with the school and its stadium, Orange Park High School celebrated Odum with "Walter Odom Day" on April 2, 1964.

In 1965, Stanley M. Vertner of the *Breeze* newspaper, presented Odum with a gavel made from some historically significant woods. These included walnut from an Ohio Indian village, as well as aged wild cherry, white oak, and Florida mimosa. There is no account to be found that is critical of Odum.

Also in 1965, Odum sponsored a political ad that cited recent accomplishments in the town, naming the new municipal buildings complex that included the Town Hall and Police and Fire Stations. He further explains that in his past term as mayor the town paid off all long-standing indebtedness "while making many improvements". His campaign ads called him qualified, responsible and experienced. He won reelection the next month.

Tragedy struck in March 1965 when Mrs. (Lela) Odum died after a short illness. She was just 46 years old, leaving



1.15.1965, *Breeze*, p1

Odum while their son, Walter Jr., and daughter, Linda, were teenagers. Among her pall bearers were J.P. Tynes, Hoyt Cotney, Frank Brown and Harley Broom.

In 1966, Odum supported the Garden Club of Orange Park in their *Keep Orange Park Beautiful* campaign, issuing a proclamation urging all citizens to observe a month of focus on reducing litter. Around this time, Odum applied for incorporation with the state who chartered Walter G. Odum, Inc. in November 1966.



Lela Odum

Also in 1966, Odum announced his resignation as mayor and town commissioner, then, a few days later also resigned his position as a member of the Clay County Board of Commissioners. He explained that he resigned because illness prevented him from doing those jobs in the manner he thinks the public should expect from elected officials. He had served as mayor for 18 years at that point, and finished 13 years as county commissioner.

In November 1967, the town issued a resolution honoring Odum. It explained that when Odum first took office, the town had one part-time policeman and one part-time clerk. At the time of the resolution, the town had five policemen, an equipped fire department and garbage collection service. Retirement of the town's bonds was again cited as well as lower taxes.

Odum's health led him to cut back on many of his activities. He sold the Soap Company and the new owners were apparently less careful about following rules. A huge problem arose when the company began dumping waste in the public dump. Doctor's Inlet residents flooded the County Commission with complaints. There had never been a complaint in the twenty years that Walter Odum owned the plant. He tried to diffuse the situation by saying the recent heavy rains and a labor strike had hampered the company's efforts. He warned that closing the plant would put thousands out of work as the company's progress affected so many other local companies.



Walter Odum

Carol Hogan calls the Soap Plant "The Grease Plant," saying her uncle worked there and his wife made him take off all his clothes after work before she would let him in the house, the smell was so bad. Fellow resident Barney Clarke remembers the effect of just crossing the bridge into Doctors Inlet. The stench was so bad it made you "want to crawl under the car seat". At the time of commission meetings, Louis Huntley, quoted in the Breeze, summed up the crowd's sentiments by saying, "I don't think there's any place outside of Hell as nasty and stinking as it is!" He got a standing ovation. Holly Point long-time resident, Barbara Davidson, also commented on the stench of the Soap Company, saying it reached her house in Orange Park and

on days when the wind picked up you wouldn't go outside because of it.

Walter Odum was a good friend and neighbor of Dick Fromhart. They, along with some others, established the Orange Park Athletic Association in the mid-1960s. The baseball side of that grew so big that another ballpark was needed. BelMed Athletic Association was created just outside the town limits. The new park created for them was named Walter Odum Park. Today it is a 6.5-acre facility that is leased to the Police Athletic League of Clay County, Inc.



Odum left the spotlight to focus on his health. He was missed. When he died in 1976, just after his 61st birthday, he went quietly, choosing cremation in lieu of the big service with many pallbearers conducted for his wife. His ashes are interred in Magnolia Cemetery with her. He was a man who served because, as Barbara Davidson says, that service needed to be done, not for personal recognition. He rallied for his neighbors in a manor he might have seen as a child in rural Georgia. In 1970, then-Mayor Hoyt Cotney spoke at the Orange Park Rotary Club. He gave an account of the town's recent business and reflected that "Walter Odum accomplished many more things than a lot of people realize". Hopefully, with the help of the *Breeze* and our local historians, we can better appreciate that now.

#### Sources:

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Dewsbury, Donald A. *Monkey Farm: A History of the Yerkes Laboratories of Primate Biology, Orange Park, Florida, 1930-1965*. Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 2010.

Personal interviews with long-time residents, Barney Clark, Barbara Davidson, Carol Hogan.

Photograph of Clay County Commission, Clay County Archives, date unknown

Staff, Daily Record. "50 Years Ago This Week." *Jax Daily Record*, 5 Mar. 2012, Accessed July 26, 2023, [www.jaxdailyrecord.com/news/2012/mar/05/50-years-ago-week-106/](http://www.jaxdailyrecord.com/news/2012/mar/05/50-years-ago-week-106/).

## **Sophia Fleming Chapter, DAR Promoting Constitution Week**

September 17<sup>th</sup> is a date set aside each year to recognize the anniversary of the US Constitution, the foundation of our very identity as a nation. We in the Historical Society encourage recognition of this holiday and all it represents.



Our friends at the DAR are striving to promote the education of and appreciation for the Constitution and invite our readers to assist. They intend to provide displays in the public libraries, request a proclamation from the Clay County Board of Commissioners, provide information in the schools, and have a bell ringing ceremony at 4 PM at the Orange Park Library on Sunday, September 17.

In addition to these things, they are asking local businesses to place Constitution Week dates on their digital signs. If you are affiliated with such a business or organization, they would like you to assist in promoting this effort. Also, if you are someone who dresses in period clothing and speaks to local groups, they would love to enlist you for this cause. Finally, if you have ideas about how our organization could assist the DAR Chapter to promote Constitution Week, please share those with us at [ophistory.org](http://ophistory.org).



## **Clarke House Tours**



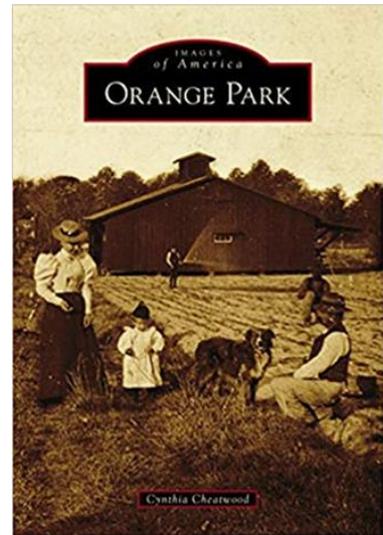
The Clarke House is open for tours on the second Sunday of each month from 2 PM to 4 PM. Our next open house will be held, Sunday, September 10. If you have not yet visited the house or, if it has just been a while, we invite you to stop by to look around. The slower pace of a Sunday afternoon provides an opportunity to tour the entire house, both upstairs and down. We hope to see you there!

### **Images of America - Orange Park**

If you would like to learn more about the history of Orange Park, please consider purchasing a copy of *Images of America – Orange Park*. This book, written by Society President, Cynthia Cheatwood, shares the history of our town through archival photographs and stories collected from a variety of sources.

The Historical Society of Orange Park has copies for sale. Copies can be purchased through the Society for \$20 each (\$15 each for Society members). *This book is also available on Amazon, Barnes and Noble, CVS or various other outlets online.*

For more information, please email us at [info@ophistory.org](mailto:info@ophistory.org). All author royalties for the sale of this book will go toward historical preservation in Orange Park.



### **Look For Us on Online**

Look for the Historical Society of Orange Park online via our website, [www.ophistory.org](http://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](#)
- [Clay County Archives](#)

