



The Historical Society of Orange Park

September 2024 Newsletter

As we move into autumn, the days are getting shorter and the weather will soon begin to cool. We will all soon be encouraged to be outside to enjoy our gorgeous fall weather. The coming of autumn also brings an increase in Society activities. Take advantage of some of the offerings listed below and join us as we celebrate and share the history of our town.

Calendar of Events

Date	Time	Event	Location
September 8, 2024	2:00 PM – 4:00 PM	Open House	Clarke House
October 13, 2024	2:00 PM – 4:00 PM	Open House	Clarke House
October 19 & 20, 2024	10:00 AM – 5:00 PM	Fall Festival	Town Hall Park
October 26, 2024	4:00 PM – 7:00 PM	Moonlight on Magnolia	Magnolia Cemetery
November 11, 2024	11:00 AM – 12 Noon	Veterans Day Ceremony	Veterans Memorial
November 18, 2024	5:30 PM – 7:00 PM	Quarterly Member Meeting	Orange Park Library

Orange Park Memories

Each 1st day of the month during 2024, the Historical Society of Orange Park is sharing vintage newspaper items, clipped from *The Breeze* newspaper (1959 to 1971). This month's clip from March of 1967 reminds us of all the wonderful community outreach projects conducted by the Woman's Club of Orange Park. It also gives us a wonderful picture of the beautiful Teresa Caldwell Miller, for whom the TC Miller Park and Community Center on McIntosh Ave. is named.

Mrs. Miller taught for over 40 years, before, during and after the desegregation of Florida schools. Starting at age 17 in the segregated Pear Grove school, she later became a teacher and the first administrator of Orange Park's Negro Elementary School that still stands at TC Miller Park.



Woman's Club Aids Miller School

The Woman's Club of Orange Park uses some of the profit from their annual Christmas Bazaar for a donation to the library of T. C. Miller Elementary School. This year the donation was in the form of a check, which will be used to purchase Weekly Readers for the first three grades and a subscription to the Florida Times Union for the students.

The check was presented by Mrs. W. A. Weaver, president of the Woman's Club, shown at left in photo with Mrs. T. M. Caldwell, principal of the school; Mrs. A. L. White, teacher of the 4th and 5th grades at T. C. Miller; and Mrs. Lee N. Duncan, library chairman of the Woman's Club.

Veterans Memorial Update

We are pleased to announce that the installation of the two new medallions honoring our new Space Force and our POWs and MIAs at the Veterans Memorial has been completed! Two 20" X 20" openings had to be created in the existing brick walls at the memorial so that the medallions could be mounted. The work was completed quickly and efficiently and the new medallions look great!

Our sincere thanks to Scotts Customizing and Restoration for completing this work, Mr. John Shipley and Jacksonville Memory Gardens for providing the new medallions and to Mike Day and Bob Scallan of the Historical Society for overseeing this project from conception to completion.



Veterans Day Essay Contest



All Clay County students are invited to participate in this year's Veterans Day Essay Contest. Each year we offer students an opportunity to submit an essay on a topic related to veterans or Veterans Day. Essay categories are separated by grade level as follows: 4th - 6th grade, 7th - 8th grade and 9th - 12th grade. Students submitting the winning essays will receive a cash prize and be invited to read their essays at this year's Veterans Day Ceremony on November 11. All essays are due no later than September 30, 2024. Detailed information regarding this year's essay contest can be downloaded by visiting the Veterans Memorial page of our website or by clicking [here](#).

Town of Orange Park Fall Festival

The Town of Orange Park will host the 42nd Annual Orange Park Fall Festival on Saturday, October 19 and Sunday, October 20, from 10 AM to 5 PM each day! The event features two full days of fun for the entire family. The festival features music, food, fun, crafts, vendors, kid's activities and live entertainment! Admission is free! Limited parking is available near the festival site and the Town has arranged for parking at Moosehaven with free shuttle service running throughout the day. To learn more about the festival, please visit <https://opfallfestival.com/>.



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 both days. If you can spare a few hours to help out, please email us at info@ophistory.org and let us know the times and dates you are available.

Moonlight on Magnolia

Moonlight on Magnolia, featuring historical guided walks through Magnolia Cemetery, will take place this year on October 26 from 4-7 PM. Visitors will be led through Magnolia Cemetery to visit “former residents” of Orange Park and hear their stories. Orange Park has had its share of interesting characters who have each made their unique contribution to creating the town we live in today. Their stories are the story of our town.



Volunteers are needed. 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. Please contact us at info@ophistory.org if you would like to participate.

Access to the cemetery will be different this year. The Town is replacing the culvert under the entrance road to the cemetery therefore, the entrance road will be closed and there will be no entry into the cemetery from Kingsley Avenue starting

September 2. Alternative access is being provided to the back of the cemetery via Azalea Avenue. We will provide more information regarding access to the cemetery as it becomes available.

Nelson Point: Orange Park’s Historical Centerpiece

By Cynthia Cheatwood

Doctor’s Lake laps at its shoreline with the rhythm of an aged storyteller. Trees sway with the gentle breeze welcoming birds and insects to hear their secrets, their memories. This spot, so near busy neighborhoods, so convenient to reach by land or water, this spot with its dappled sunlight and charm, is a sanctuary and a guardian of place and history. This is Nelson Point in Orange Park, Florida, a community resource that has been 1500 years in the making.



Archaeological evidence proves that the area was used by Native peoples for a variety of purposes long before non-native settlers arrived. Nelson Point, with its adjacent creek, affords access to the nearby springs that drew generations of native people to its effervescent waters. The shoreline of the Point yields proof that hunting parties came for the small game they knew they would find there. According to John Nelson, for whom the Point is named, “all along the coast here, there were Indian arrowheads and Indian pottery from the tribes who would camp up here in the woods. This is the north end of the shore. In the wintertime, the winds don’t come here and they’re protected.” Alligators and water moccasins were everywhere, an easy food source for Timucua and Seminole people for centuries.

When Europeans ventured into Florida, they found Doctor’s Lake to be a great settlement area. As early as December 1765, during the British period of Florida history, John and William Bartram explored the lake and the few British plantations around it.

In the 1770’s, Loyalists, William and Rebecca Pengree received a land grant to establish a plantation on land that included Nelson Point. Buildings were erected and various farming spaces were established. Things were going very well until the conclusion of the American Revolution. All British plantations were overtaken by the Spanish and their owners forced to leave Florida. William Pengree, determined to return, struck a deal with the Spanish to supply them with naval stores (turpentine, tar, pitch) with his sawmill. The family returned and christened the plantation, *Laurel Grove*.

Things were not simple, however. Local Natives were not consulted about the changes taking place. They became violent and attacked all the plantations west of the St. Johns River. According to the East Florida papers in the Florida State Archives, a memo to the Spanish Governor, *Juan Nepomuceno de Quesada* on August 29, 1795, said, “News from Picolata of signs of perhaps 200 Indians seen near Pengree house; has advised militia commanders to be on alert”. Mr. Pengree died in 1794, leaving the plantation, well established at the time, to be run by his vulnerable wife. She tried but, in 1802, the Papers note (from John McQueen), “Indians killed a pig of Mrs. Pengree; news of many Indians coming with Bowles against East Florida”. Mrs. Pengree was personally threatened when this pig was killed in front of her. She decided to sell Laurel Grove and return to her native

Georgia with her family. The land all over Orange Park, including Nelson Point, which had been well-cultivated by Pengree suffered from his absence.

In 1803, Zephaniah Kingsley purchased Laurel Grove and used the land of Nelson Point to grow Sea Island cotton, which was in great demand. Kingsley knew how to maximize productivity and use every space to profitable enterprise.

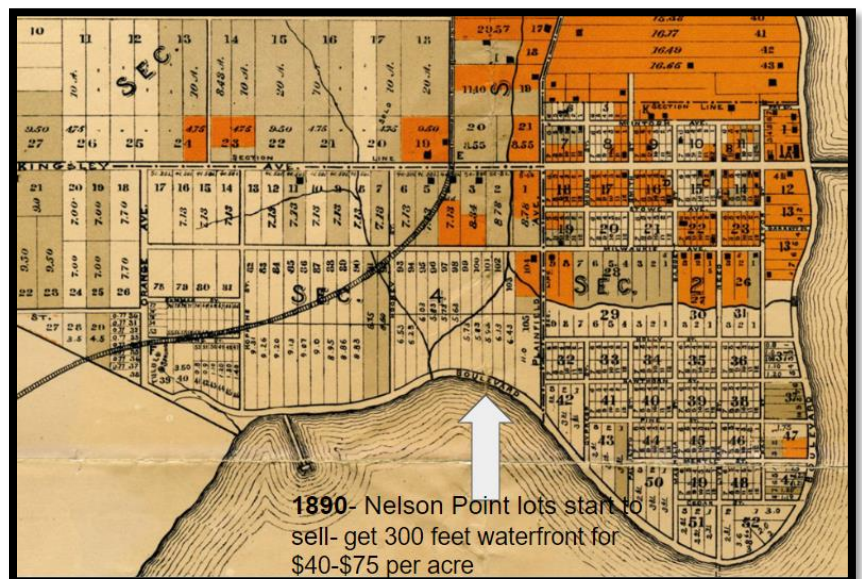
In 1812, Georgian George Matthews, working with James Madison, launched a plan to take Florida from the Spanish. Matthews enlisted fellow Georgian, John Houston McIntosh, who owned land in Georgia and present-day Duval County, and others as “Patriots” to invade East Florida. This Patriot’s Rebellion failed, but not before Laurel Grove was destroyed. McIntosh and Kingsley made a deal over a few years that virtually traded Laurel Grove for the Ft. George property known as Kingsley Plantation today.

McIntosh redeveloped Laurel Grove much like Kingsley’s plantation and it prospered. He died in 1836. His family sold *Laurel Grove* to Georgia planter Stephen Bryan in 1853 for \$12,000. By 1860 Bryan was the largest planter in Clay County, as the estate was valued at over \$69,000. He only had it for 10 years, selling it to Catherine Hookey during the Civil War. He lost money in the deal, but so did she. She paid him \$40,000 in Confederate money for the place in 1863. That was pretty much the end for *Laurel Grove Plantation*.

The plantation was never profitable again. The area was somewhat feral during the Civil War. No fighting occurred in the area, nor did much upkeep. The poor state of the whole area gave Reconstruction era investors something of great interest.

In 1877, Washington Gano Benedict of the Florida Winter Home and Improvement Company established the new town of Orange Park, Florida out of the ruins of the old plantation. He lured many northern folks to relocate. As part of his advertising, he said that on Doctor’s Lake you could get 300 feet of waterfront for \$40-\$75 per acre. The lots of Nelson Point did not start selling until 1890. The plat map created for the town laid out numbered lots in numbered sections. Nelson Point’s lots 96-103 were in Section 4 on that map.

A novelist who had, in 1880, visited Mr. Benedict’s fine Hotel Marion on Orange Park’s riverside commented about an excursion Mr. Benedict had conducted with a group of travelers. He described the walk from the Springs to Doctor’s Lake as “ a perfect forest of jasmine in full blossom. The trees that grew near the brook were of a young growth, and for half an acre in extent they were loaded



with jasmine vines so thickly covered with flowers that the green leaves could hardly be seen.” (Optic, Oliver, *Down South*, p.224)

About 1882, Henry Hezekiah Horton built the Horton Lumber and Sawmill on Doctor’s Lake. Webb's History of Florida, 1885, said, “It turned out 7,500 feet of lumber per day and employed seven men. It used a 25-horsepower engine to make boards, laths and shingles.” The sawmill was located at the water’s edge on Nelson Point but must have been leased from the Florida Winter Home and Improvement Co. as no deed ever existed showing Horton owned it.

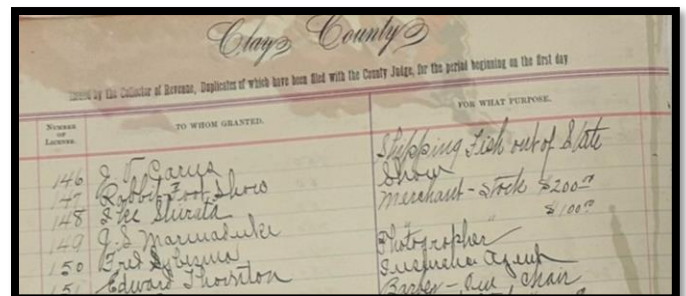
No period captures the imagination more than the heyday of Florida’s lumbering boom between 1880 and 1930. During this period, thousands of loggers toiled in the piney woods and cypress swamps of the state on any given day to supply the hundreds of mills with raw logs for finished lumber. There were so many native trees still in Florida that many ventured into the naval stores and lumber trades.

A review of archived tax rolls and license applications shows Nelson Point had at least three different such enterprises. From 1897-1903, Hilliard Lumber Company; from 1908-1909: Goss Mattox, Turpentine Distiller, and 1958-1960: St. Johns Timber Company used the Point’s resources for profit. This industry became a ready source of employment throughout Florida. Squatters on the land during this time were not uncommon. Once the native trees were used up, pines were planted to replace them so that the industry could continue. There were 12 licensed turpentine distillers in Clay County in 1912 and 4 licensed sawmills. Turpentine was done in various parts of Orange Park. Harry Horton (son of Henry Hezekiah) distilled turpentine as a sole proprietor and later with a partner only known as Johnson.

Jesse V. Carnes purchased land in Nelson Point for his Fish House in 1914. He had a fishing business since 1893, with a dock off River Road. By moving to Nelson Point his business expanded. He packed and shipped fish all along the east coast using nets, wire traps and trot lines, yielding many thousand pounds each day. They dressed the catfish, but the bream and speckled perch were shipped as is. Mr. Carnes even had an icehouse where he stored blocks of ice used to pack fish for shipment. For twenty years this would provide income for local families, many who desperately needed it during the Great Depression. The business closed after his death.

The Great Depression hit Florida forestry hard. 1935-1939 tax rolls indicate that almost all the lots of Nelson Point lost their owners. The status of “tax certificate” appeared across most local business tax lists.

Things started to pick up again at the end of 1939 and parcels were purchased at low prices as the country recovered. Some real estate businesses formed. Garrett Properties purchased Nelson Point land among other parcels. Several owners had short term holdings.



In 1943, Lauri and Mary Soini purchased lots 102-103. Later they bought the remaining lots until they owned most of what we call Nelson Point. Lauri Soini was lured away from Florida by the chance to sell ice to folks in Arabia, once the oil business had started there. He was anxious to sell his 20 acres of Nelson Point.

World War II veteran John Nelson returned from his family's farm in South Dakota with his winter-weary wife, June. He bought the property for \$15,000. The deal was sweetened by the fact that along with the land there was a house on the dock that had been the Carnes Fish House business. John Nelson explained, "It had a boat and it had a cow and it had chickens and the house was furnished. Didn't have to buy any furniture." There was also a reliable old pickup truck and a sawmill.



In 2011, when Mr. Nelson was asked about the Horton sawmill he said, "The sawmill was up in the woods. I moved it down there. I sawed my own lumber and I made all the buildings for my property." He stood to explain. "That was right over next door, back there. I'll just show you this piece of wood laying right here, that's what's out there right now. There's a million pieces out there right now. That's what's left from the sawmill. You can walk from here (*pointing*) halfway out to that post way out there without getting your knees wet."

The home on the old Carnes dock served the Nelsons for many years. When it was considered not safe for the Nelson children to live over the water, Mr. Nelson used his enterprising mind to roll the whole house onto the land. They did not

even remove anything from the house in the process. He used the old Soini truck and logs to move the whole structure at once. They slept in it the same night as though nothing had changed.

Over the decades some of the people who owned parts of the Nelson Point lots did so for investment purposes only. A few of these were widow estates whose inheritances needed a safe resting spot with a chance for growth. They never created a home on the land. A few used the old Carnes Fish House on its wooden dock for housing, but the most personal memories did not begin until John and June made it theirs.

The Nelson family thrived at Nelson Point. John was a contractor and handyman. He was generous with the land and his time and talents. John's construction projects included Orange Park High's stadium, St. Johns Country Day School, the Clothes Closet, Orange Park United Methodist's Sunday school buildings and more. He volunteered with the James Boys to provide wheelchair ramps and repairs for citizens in need.

John and June were initial donors to the town's new library, as well as the OP Skateboard Park, and Clay County Fair Association. In 1988, John hung the first Christmas lights in Orange Park, which June had asked local businesses to donate to cover costs. The tradition continues in modern holidays.

The Nelsons were Orange Park United Methodist's longest surviving couple from its start in 1948's beginning. June helped develop Scouting in the area, was president of the Orange Park Elementary PTA and OP High's parent groups. She was on the original planning committee for the Clay County Agricultural Fair and was a volunteer at OP Medical Center for 25 years, among other activities. They were also founding members of the Historical Society of Orange Park.

The lives of the Nelson family at the Point were charmed with the beauty and abundance of the environment around them. John's daughter, Sandra explained, "Dad, because he was so mechanical, he would make the most interesting playground toys for us and our friends to play on out here. He would take the crankshaft out of a truck or something and make it a skeeter poop, a merry go round for us or make swings that swung right out. We used to have picnics and when I was a little girl in Girl Scouts, our Girl Scout troops would camp over there."

"My brother and I, when we were little, we would pretend like we were on a wagon train ride. We'd play all through the woods and my mother would have to call and call for us to come home. We never wanted to come home because it was so wonderful to play in the woods."

"We had bonfires. The Methodist Church was just getting started with Tom Ryan, one of the first preachers. On Sunday, church folks would pack lunches and sit down there [at Nelson Point] and eat and they enjoyed it." The whole time Sandra explained her childhood, John Nelson's face was beaming.



For a long time, John Nelson's dream was to share Nelson Point with the community after his death. He said, "Take this piece of land and somehow get the town to own it and make a recreational park here where kids can come down and build a little box out there where you can stick fishing poles, have picnic tables up here, and just let people come down and get a piece of land and plant their own garden and flowers and everything."

When John Nelson died in 2016, his daughters went on a mission to make John's dream a reality. The Town of Orange Park loved the idea but the property value was too high to be financed with local tax dollars. In a deal between the State of Florida and Clay County, the state purchased and then gifted the property to the county

to assuage the burdens of increased traffic created by new state road projects. Clay County offered the property to the Town of Orange Park with the caveat that it must always be called Rob Bradley Park at Nelson Point. That is the name of the property today and everyone is appreciative that the deal was struck. However, the water softly lapping against the rocky bulkhead and the sweet, musky fragrance of jasmine remember the place for all the reasons explained here. Historic Nelson Point is about community, about nature and about the value of treasured memories.

Sources:

Ancestry.com and Find-a-Grave, <https://www.findagrave.com/>

Blakey, Arch Fredric. *Parade of Memories: A History of Clay County, Florida*. Jacksonville, FL: Drummond Press, 1976.

Clay County Archives Resources (plat maps, tax rolls, grantor/grantee books, deed books, license records, more)

Clay County Clerk of Court and Comptroller (clayclerk.com). Online official property records. Landmark Web Official Records Search (clayclerk.com)

Drobney, Jeffrey A. (1996) "Company Towns and Social Transformation in the North Florida Timber Industry, 1880-1930," *Florida Historical Quarterly*: Vol. 75: No. 2, Article 3. <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/fhq/vol75/iss2/3>

Florida State Road Department (Tallahassee, FL: FDOT, 1936) Map Credit: Courtesy the private collection of Roy Winkelman.

Historical Society of Orange Park resources (video interview with John Nelson, 2011; photographs, maps, and more)

Hooper, Kevin S. *The Early History of Clay County: A Wilderness That Could Be Tamed*. Charleston, SC: History Press, 2006.

Kingsley, Zephaniah. Spanish Land claims. State Archives of Florida, Florida Memory. 1825. <https://www.floridamemory.com/items/show/232753> *map transferring Laurel Grove to McIntosh*

Map of Clay County, Florida, 1865 (usf.edu) Exploring Florida. Courtesy of the private collection of Roy Winkelman. <https://fcit.usf.edu/Florida/maps/countgal/army65/10army65.htm>

Schafer, Daniel L. 2013. "Ghost Plantations West of the River." In *Zephaniah Kingsley Jr. and the Atlantic World: Slave Trader, Plantation Owner, Emancipator*. Gainesville, FL: U of Fla.

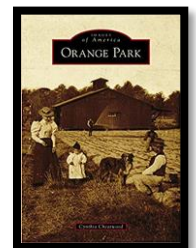
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Images of America: Orange Park

Images of America: Orange Park, authored by Historical Society President, Cynthia Cheatwood, is a wonderful way to learn about the history of Orange Park. 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 the upcoming Sunday afternoons of September 8 and October 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.

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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