



The Historical Society of Orange Park

January 2026 Newsletter

Happy New Year and welcome to 2026! 2025 was an exciting year but it is now history. We look forward to big things this year!

Our next Quarterly Member Meeting will be held January 20 at the Orange Park Library. Sandra DiGiovanni will be our featured speaker and share information on historic homes in Orange Park. We hope you will join us.

The new year brings with it a new slate of officers to lead the Historical Society. Our officers for 2026 are as follows:

- President: Cindy Cheatwood
- Vice President: Bob Scallan
- Secretary: Susana Thompson
- Treasurer: Van Hogan
- Membership Chairperson: Julie Smithers

We offer our sincere thanks to Sandra DiGiovanni for her work as Vice President and Membership Chair these past years. Her contributions have been invaluable and have made our Society better through her research and efforts to strengthen our membership.

The new year also means that it is time to renew your membership. If you have not yet done so, we invite you to renew your membership either by mail, using the attached renewal form, or online via our website, www.ophistory.org/store.

We hope you enjoy the newsletter.

Calendar of Events

Date	Time	Event	Location
January 11, 2026	2:00 PM – 4:00 PM	Open House	Clarke House
January 20, 2026	6:00 PM – 7:30 PM	Quarterly Member Meeting	Orange Park Library
February 8, 2026	2:00 PM – 4:00 PM	Open House	Clarke House
March 8, 2026	2:00 PM – 4:00 PM	Open House	Clarke House

Quarterly Member Meeting

Please mark your calendars and plan to join us at 6 PM, Tuesday, January 20, at the Orange Park Library, 2054 Plainfield Avenue, for our next Quarterly Member Meeting. Sandra DiGiovanni will present stories about historic homes in Orange Park dating from the 1880's through the 1950's. Every home has a unique story to tell. We look forward to seeing you there!



Lynch House



Via Tisdale Home

Orange Park Memories

As we move into 2026, the Historical Society would like to highlight 12 of Orange Park's historic homes. Each month we will share stories of a house in the town and invite readers to share their memories of the place.

To begin our year, we chose the town's oldest continuous private residence, here since 1878, which is located at 1200 Plainfield Ave. Retired minister, Dr. William Helffrich built the house with two of his five sons. When it was complete, a party was held, welcoming neighbors and crew to enjoy food spread out on sawhorse-tables. Mrs. Helffrich joined them and made the house a home. Not long after her arrival, yellow fever hit the area, and the house became a makeshift hospital with Dr. John Helffrich, the oldest son, providing care to all. They did not lose a single patient, but Mrs. Helffrich became terribly ill and decided she could not live in Florida. The family moved back to Pennsylvania and William sold the house.

In 1909 Stanley Morgan, a local businessman, and wife, Nellie, bought it and lived there until his death in 1955. He was a vocal participant in local government and died in the rocking chair on his front porch. Nellie Morgan transplanted swamp plants into the yard, some of which are still there today!

Trudy Sigman, local ballet teacher, owned the house for many years thereafter. She ran the Orange Park School of Dance on Kingsley Ave and was beloved by hundreds. The current owner fell in love with the home after being given a tour by Trudy. A local preservation specialist, he is safeguarding the home for the future.

Please share any memories you might have of this wonderful piece of Orange Park's story.

**Helffrich House - 1915****Helffrich House – Late 1900's****Trudy Sigman**

Orange Park Remembers Pearl Harbor

One December 7th, over seventy people joined with the Historical Society to acknowledge the military service of Orange Park's Arthur Barnes Gilbert. Enlisting at age 17, Gilbert's first posting was aboard the USS Arizona, putting him aboard the most serious target at Pearl Harbor. He survived and continued to serve for 20 more years, eventually landing in Clay County. He settled with his family in Orange Park and quietly lived out his life. When he passed in 1973 there was no military recognition, no mention of his service was included on his headstone in Magnolia Cemetery.

The Historical Society contacted the Veterans Administration, and a bronze marker was sent to Orange Park. This was set at Gilbert's gravesite and a ceremony planned. Our American Legion Post #250 friends, upon hearing Gilbert's story, rallied to help make a special ceremony for Orange Park's only known USS Arizona survivor. Their state commander, Jessica Moore, came to speak in honor of Gilbert's service accompanied by other local Legion leaders. Chaplain

**Arthur Gilbert**

Kenny Greenway offered an invocation and benediction to open and close the ceremony. The Society thanks Mike Day for coordinating with the American Legion on our behalf.

Gilbert's family asked for Navy participation and that was provided by Lt. Commander Douglas Pistorius, an Active-Duty Naval Aviator with over 20 years of service, currently stationed at NAS Jax. His remarks highlighted milestones that he shared with Gilbert, adding charm to the presentation.

The Navy also provided the NAS JAX Honor Guard Team for the ceremony, which included ADAR Kevin Walker, PRAN Umika Neredimelli, AEAN Ja'Marien Wafford, and CS2 Ahbreanna Griffin.

After months of planning a gravesite ceremony, heavy rain loomed in the forecast for Dec. 7th. The Society is most grateful to Jennifer Gesell and Brandy Black of the Clay County Library who made the space available for us in the OP branch library. It worked out perfectly.

We also appreciate the camera work of Keith Bartholomew, keith@kbartholomew.com whose photos can be seen on the Society's Facebook page.



Special recognition and our thanks are given to Sandra and Barry DiGiovanni. Sandra worked to procure the new bronze marker from the Veterans Administration. Barry donated his time to cast a concrete pad for the bronze marker, transport it to the cemetery and place it at Mr. Gilbert's gravesite. We are grateful for their efforts. We also acknowledge the efforts of Bob Scallan. Bob coordinated with the Navy to facilitate the participation of Lt. Commander Pistorius and the Navy Color Guard.

Family photos of Gilbert were shared at the ceremony and have been added to the collection of the Society. The Gilbert story reminds us that we can make a difference,

even if we feel our actions are too small. Together we build the story of community, exemplified in this ceremony, which undergirds our history.



Members of American Legion Post #250



Lt. Commander Douglas Pistorius



**American Legion State Commander
Jessica Moore**



The US Flag is presented to Mr. Dennis Gilbert

Historic Holiday Happiness

On December 8th, around seventy folks from local historical groups joined for a festive party at the River House of Club Continental. The historic venue added to the flavor as the Christmas spirit floated inside and out of the former golf clubhouse of Hibernia. The history of the structure was posted around the space with a scavenger hunt that included riddles about that history. Congratulations to Melanie and Jim Tharp for taking first place and Julie and Chuck Smithers for coming in second.

Each of the different historical groups brought goodies to share. There was a great abundance, and many took home goody bags of leftovers. Thank you to all who provided the food and played the games. The Society thanks Kelly Powell of the River House for making the special night available for us and for providing nonalcoholic beverages in addition to the cash bar.

The Christmas party, like the Spring tea party, is a members-only benefit. Please remember to renew your Society membership if you have not done so already.



Hometown Holiday

The Historical Society and the Town of Orange Park celebrated the holidays at Hometown Holiday on Saturday, December 13 and Sunday, December 14. The Clarke House was decorated with lights and greenery for the holidays. A steady stream of visitors toured the Clarke House both nights with the old house sparking childhood memories of loved ones and special places. Members of the Society were on hand to welcome our guests and provide information.

Outside, the entire park was arrayed with lights. Visitors to Clarke House Park enjoyed food provided by a variety of vendors, trail rides through the trees, musical offerings, shopping and visits with Santa. In all, the event provided two very festive evenings that were enjoyed by many families. Hometown Holiday is always a wonderful way to celebrate the season.



Veterans' Corner: Wreaths Across America

On Saturday, December 13, a group of volunteers gathered at the Veterans Memorial to honor our deceased veterans this holiday season through the Wreaths Across America program. After a brief ceremony featuring the introduction of ceremonial wreath presenters and remarks by Alan Watt, volunteers scattered across both Magnolia and Moosehaven Cemeteries to place donated wreaths on the graves of veterans interred there. It was a perfect day to have this ceremony. The crowd was amazing and all the volunteers did a terrific job. Four years and counting. Let's continue to honor the veterans in both these cemeteries.

We need to make a special shoutout to our ceremonial wreath presenters:



Zachary Bryan: US Army
 Joshua Jeffries: US Navy
 Peyton Cooper: US Air Force
 Mya Wolf: US Space Force

Master Sgt. Wood: POW/MIA
 Corporal Moore: US Marine Corps
 Sgt. Tucker: US Coast Guard
 Michael Maxfield: US Merchant Marines

Once again, several groups came out to place wreaths for our veterans in both Magnolia and Moosehaven Cemeteries:

Rotary Club Orange Park Sunrise
 Elevated CPA
 Cub Scout Pack 25

Boy Scout Troop 25
 Girl Scout Troop 310204-H
 Oakleaf Trailblazers



And we could not have done it without the Black Creek Young Marines, the 1st Florida Regiment Unit of the year. This group has been our color guard for all four years. Each year they seem to outdo themselves and we are honored to have them participate. Our Color Guard Participants were as follows:

Corporal DeGeorge
 Lance Cpl. Wood
 Lance Cpl. Tough
 Pvt. Wood

Thank you to Alan Watt for helping bring the ceremony together and a special "Thank You" to Jacksonville Memory Gardens for its timely flyover. The flyover scheduled for Jacksonville Memory Gardens flew over

Magnolia Cemetery during the ceremony providing an unplanned benefit for our ceremony! See everyone next year.

Historical Society of Orange Park – 2025 Year in Review

Following is a list of activities the Society participated in over the last year:

- Clay History Roundtable- Penny Farms - January 10
- Open House- January 12
- Community Insert articles submitted - January
- Ch. 4 OP History Broadcasts Taped - January aired February
- Open House- February 9
- Black History Walks - February 15 and February 22
- Members Group Outing to Keystone Heights – March 1
- Carrie Clarke Day - March 8
- *Earl Harrington Award* presented to Carol Hogan - March 8
- Open House- March 9
- Quarterly Meeting, *Heroes, Histories & Mysteries of Clay* - March 8
- Green House preservation meeting at Town Hall - April 11
- Hicks Marker Presentation - April 12
- Open House- April 13
- Senior Center presentation, *The History of Orange Park* - April 15,
- Celebrate Clay Reinhold Awards - April 22
- Members Only Tea Party - May 8
- Open House- May 11
- Veterans Tour, Magnolia Cemetery - May 23
- Clay County Historical Society Meeting Presentation, *The History of Club Continental* - May 27
- Open House- June 8
- First Baptist Bible School tour group - June 16
- Jax History Center booth - June 14
- Quarterly Meeting, *Celebrating Clay Scout Camps* - June 24
- Riverside Plane Crash tour - July 25
- Clay History Roundtable, Orange Park Library - July 26
- Driving Tour submitted to *ExploreClay*
- Bartram Conference - August 1-2
- Open House- August 10
- Recorded the Oral History of Kyle Abshire - August 27
- Painted the Clarke House Master Bedroom - September 5, 6
- Open House- September 14
- Quarterly Meeting, *Bartram in Clay* - September 18
- Open House, *Pickin on the Porch* - October 12
- Fall Festival - October 19-20
- *Moonlight on Magnolia* - October 26
- Nelson Point Historical Marker approval - October 29

- HSOP Scholarship created - October
- Orange Park Town Hall Railroad display history donation - October
- Open House, *Pickin' in the Park* - November 9
- Green Cove Springs Library, *Veterans: All in the Family* Talk- Nov. 3
- Orange Park Library, - *Building the Vets Memorial* - Nov. 5
- Veterans Day Ceremony - November 11
- PBS *Florida Roadtrip* interview - November 28
- Gilbert Marker Dedication - December 7
- Clay Historical Society's Christmas Party, River House (members only) - Dec 8,
- Clarke House Holiday Decorating - December 10
- Hometown Holiday - December 13-14

HSOP Offers Scholarship Opportunity for Orange Park High School Students



In recent months, the board has been working out the details of a \$1000 scholarship to be offered to eligible seniors at Orange Park High School. The group felt it important to give back to the community and to help a deserving senior as they prepare for college. Prospective applicants must be preparing to enter either a four- or two-year college or career/technical school. Other criteria are: 3.0 GPA, must be representing the school in a respectful manner, be a member of at

least one community service organization, and write an essay on the topic – *How has history and community service shaped you as a person and prepared you for the future?* A grateful thank you goes out to Dairy Queen and Boger's Shoes for their contributions which helped fund the scholarship! Once the scholarship is awarded, we will publish the winner's information in the newsletter.

Please consider assisting in funding next year's scholarship or connecting us with a business that may be willing to be a sponsor.

Pleasant Point Cemetery

Pleasant Point Cemetery was established in the 1880's and is registered as a state historical site. It was part of an African American community known as Magnolia, which became a stronghold of Northern abolitionists beginning in the 1850's. During the Civil War, Union troops occupied Magnolia, and following the war, the Magnolia Hotel temporarily housed the Freedmen's Bureau and an orphanage.

Magnolia was home to a vibrant African American community, boasting prominent families such as the Forrester's, as well as Pizel and Mary Ambrose Robinson, who are ancestors of the legendary



entertainer Patti LaBelle and respected educator Thomas Hogans. The cemetery is also the final resting place of other esteemed community members, including individuals from the Jenkins, Suber, and Lewis families. Notable, at least four veterans are interred in Pleasant Point Cemetery.

Pleasant Point was virtually hidden from view until October 2014, when a group of volunteers began efforts to clean up and restore the cemetery. Thanks to their dedication and hard work, the cemetery is well on its way to being preserved for future generations. At the start of this project, only six individuals were documented as being buried at Pleasant Point; to date, that number has increased to 14. The Florida Public Archaeological Network is planning to conduct a survey of the cemetery using ground penetrating radar in early 2026.

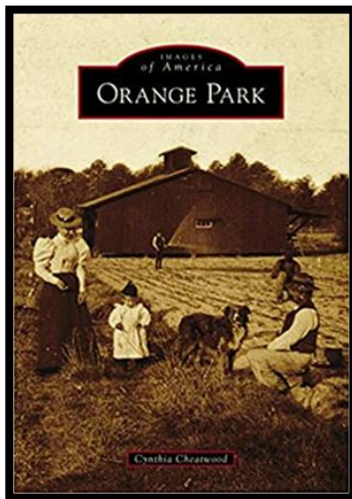
Got pics?

The Society is looking for photographs to add to our resources. If you have long-time-ago images of people and/or places in Orange Park, please share them. In this increasingly visual world, there is a lot to learn from these glimpses of our past. You can share them through email at info@ophistory.org or through mail at P. O. Box 08, Orange Park, 32067. Originals will be returned after the Society makes a scan.



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

Please join us Sunday, January 11, from 2 PM to 4 PM to tour the Clarke House. The Clarke House, built



in 1912, served as the family home for William and Carrie Clarke for many years. It features hardwood floors, plaster 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.

Look For Us Online

Look for the Historical Society of Orange Park online via our website, www.ophistory.org, our [Instagram](#) page 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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Orange Park, FL 32073



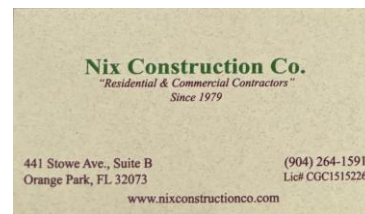
Jacksonville Memory Gardens,
111 Blanding Blvd.
Orange Park, FL 32073



orangeparkhistorytours.com



New Way Hearing Aids, Inc.
1494 Park Avenue
Orange Park, FL 32073



Nix Construction Company



Historical Society of Orange Park, Inc.

P.O. Box 08
Orange Park, FL 32067

2026 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	_____
Washington Gano Benedict Founders Level			\$100	_____
TC Miller Level Annual Membership			\$250	_____
Orange Park Normal & Industrial School Level			\$500	_____
Carrie Clarke Level (3 years)			\$1,000	_____
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!