The Magazine of the Florida Humanities Council

FORUM

WINTER 2000

THE FLORIDA GATHERING

FERNANDINA BEACH

BLESSED & BURDENED
Keep the Community In Cultural Tourism

I came to Florida a strong advocate of community-based cultural heritage tourism, with the emphasis on community-based. Cultural tourism is the hot new trend in the travel market in Florida, as elsewhere. It grows out of the realization that an increasing number of tourists want to experience “the real thing,” and that a town’s cultural and natural assets—museums and art galleries, historic neighborhoods, architecture, and environmental resources—can be promoted to draw visitors to “off-the-beaten-path” destinations. Here in Florida the cultural traveler might visit Eatonville for the Zora Neale Hurston Festival, for example; take the Cuban Heritage Trail through Ybor City in Tampa; or explore the little-known cultural treasures of Okeechobee, Homosassa or Mount Dora, sites of the Humanities Council’s popular cultural tourism weekends of recent years.

But community-based heritage tourism has an added critical dimension. As Herb Hiller, author of the popular “Guide To The Small and Historic Lodgings of Florida” and a Humanities Council board member, puts it: “It is organized with local priorities and respect for local resources in mind.” At its best, community-based heritage tourism preserves a town’s special character, instills local pride, and generates dollars. This is tourism from the bottom up, not the top down.

This brings us to Fernandina Beach, site of our fifth annual Florida Gathering. The Humanities Council has been working hand-in-hand with civic and cultural leaders and local humanities institutions for a year to develop our millennial heritage tourism weekend on beautiful Amelia Island. The partnership began in Mount Dora at last year’s Gathering, when Ron Kurtz, director of the Amelia Island Museum of History, said he was thrilled at the possibility of hosting a Gathering. Ron introduced us to his town, hosted a grant-writing workshop, and connected us with people who know the island best. We began to see Fernandina Beach through the eyes of its residents.

This is what makes The Florida Gathering unique. The people who have the most intimate knowledge of the places we visit help shape the itinerary. It’s what ensures the authenticity that distinguishes the Gathering from other tourism offerings.

We hope this FORUM issue, produced in partnership with the Amelia Island Museum of History; whets your appetite for learning more about this lovely seaside town that wants to retain its sense of community and historical integrity. In fact, we hope it stimulates your curiosity about the other hidden corners of our state—the small towns and rural communities that are the “real” Florida.

- Fran Cary
The Florida Gathering at Fernandina Beach

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A chronology by Raymond Arsenault, the eminent Florida historian and former Fernandina Beach resident.

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Join us for a weekend celebration of the history and heritage of the seaside village of Fernandina Beach, located on beautiful Amelia Island, Florida's sea island.

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Idella Parker, whom Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings called "the perfect maid," offers less than flattering impressions of her former employer.

On the cover: Fernandina Beach mayor Ronnie Sapp shown in front of his family's 1902 home in the city's historic district.
As an 81-year-old college professor retired from the Florida State University, I read with great interest your fall 1999 issue on the ways World War II changed the face of Florida. As a conscientious objector during that war, I was both surprised and delighted by your story on “Another Side of the War.” I was intimately involved in that “other side,” serving in CPS camps in North Carolina, California, Montana, and (finally) Florida.

I knew only in general terms about the CPS battle against hookworm in Florida. In late 1945 I transferred to Florida as our Smokejumper unit closed, and spent only a few months at one branch of CPS 149 at OIuestee, not far from Lake City. At OIuestee we worked for the Forest Service, as I had done during most of my CPS experience.

At that time I didn’t even dream that I would wind up teaching 45 years at Florida State University, then of course the Florida State College for Women.

– Gregg Phifer, Tallahassee

With my parents and two older brothers I lived in and around St. Pete from 1927-1942, then returned in 1944 to graduate (barely) from St. Pete high in 1945. My Father, brothers and I served variously in the Air Corps, Marines and Infantry. Hence, this issue was extremely interesting to me, especially your article, “Peace At Last.”

Unlike most history related writing, the bone-dry names and dates that so bored us as children, you draw out the humanity.

– Frank Lawner, Dade City

Although I am not a native Floridian, the magazine evoked memories of my youth. It is an extraordinary selection of fascinating material. The language is colorful and the quotes superb. I particularly enjoyed the one: “Florida has its own North and South but the northern area is strictly southern and the southern area is northern.”

Nothing much has changed, has it?

– Thomas Tighe, Tampa

We were delighted to read the Fall 1999 FORUM especially the article “The Skirted Soldiers” by Gordon Patterson. It was perhaps the greatest involvement of Daytona Beach in that war effort, and Dr. Bethune was our leading citizen for several decades.

May we point out an error in the caption to the photograph on page 33 in the upper right corner. It says, “In the background, the Tarragona Arch stands, an uncompleted reminder of the 1920s boom. What is actually shown is the famous Band Shell at our Boardwalk, built during the 1930s, and presently is being restored with the help of a generous state grant. It is the site of popular summer band concerts and many other community events on the shore of the Atlantic Ocean.”

The Tarragona Arch was indeed built during the 1920s, and was completed. It was the gateway to the then prestigious Highlands subdivision. This large and beautiful stone structure once had two arches, but one was removed when U.S. 92 was widened in the 1940s. More recently, in the 1990s, the remaining arch was moved a bit further south to allow further improvements to the highway. The City is seeking a state grant to restore this magnificent structure to its former grandeur, and stands as a beautiful reminder of our past.

– Cheryl Atwell, Daytona Beach

The Fall 1999 issue was particularly interesting to me, since I spent a small part of the war (the Big one) in and around Key West chasing the very active U-boats.

But I must pick a couple of nits. One is an error of omission and one of commission. First, the beautiful photography on the cover has no credits assigned, and the aircraft are not identified. They are unmistakably Northrop BT-1s; about 54 of these scout/dive bombers were placed in service, but they saw little if any combat.

After 1942, they were used primarily for training until 1943. “Tough as nails, deadly as arsenic” in your jumped caption may be overstating the qualities of these planes.

Second, in the photo on lower left of page 27, the aircraft identified as P-38s are in fact Bell P-39 Air Cobras. This was a high performance close-support fighter that went into production in 1939; almost 10,000 were built, and they flew in British and Russian forces as well as the U.S. Army Air Corps. Although the P-numbers differ by only one digit, the two aircraft could not be more different in appearance and performance.

Keep up the good work and don’t be unduly concerned by my kind of quibbling.

– George Kranz, Merritt Island

As a former P-38 pilot with over 1000 hours in that great airplane I was particularly pleased to see a picture entitled “P-38’s on the Tarmac, Fort Myers.” Then I looked for the P-38’s-there weren’t any! I did see a pic of some P-39’s. Could some copywriter mistake a single tailed P-39 from the twin tailed P-38? I guess they did.

– William Maass, Nokomis

Although I am not old enough to remember WWII, I was (and am) a warplane buff. On page 26 of your fall 1999 magazine, you identify a plane (lower left) as a P-38. It’s a P-39 (I think). But, the P-38 was much more important to the war effort. The “Lightning” paved the way for victory in the Pacific.

– Senator Jim Sebesta, St. Petersburg

– Senator Jim Sebesta, St. Petersburg
The Smithsonian to Visit Small Town Florida

Six small-town museums in Florida will have the opportunity to partner with FHC and the Smithsonian Institution to bring the exhibit “Yesterday’s Tomorrow” to their community in 2001. Part of the Smithsonian’s Museum on Main Street program, the 500 square foot exhibit is designed for small museums in town with populations under 10,000.

FHC and the Smithsonian will work with each site over the next year to prepare for the mounting of this exhibit, which presents a historical overview of popular expectations and beliefs about the future from the late 19th through the late 20th century. It features an array of public humanities programs, including a reading and discussion series, an environmental history exhibit and a public television documentary. Totaling more than $136,000, these grants provide non-profit organizations with the resources to bring together public and humanities scholars to explore and discuss the history, heritage and public policy issues facing Florida.

What is This Thing Called Work? Searching for a Sense of Place

Each 4-day seminar is designed to provide Florida K-12 teachers with time for intellectual growth and stimulation and for professional exchange. Seminars are cross-disciplinary, experiential in design, and allow for collaborative learning. Seminars offer in-service credit, are aligned with Sunshine State Standards, and best of all, there is no cost to teachers who are selected.

For details, visit our website at www.flahum.org or call us at 813-272-3473 ext. 21. Then tell a teacher who made a difference in your life!

“Parallel Lives” Visits Palm Beach and Martin Counties

For details, visit our website at www.flahum.org or call us at 813-272-3473 ext. 21. Then tell a teacher who made a difference in your life!

“Parallel Lives,” an FHC program which brings together two Florida writers, one black and one white, to talk about growing up in the segregated South will travel to four south Florida communities in February. The programs are funded by a generous grant from the Community Foundation of Palm Beach and Martin Counties.

“Parallel Lives,” which has had standing room only crowds and rave reviews from around the state, features Bill Maxwell, St. Petersburg Times columnist, and Beverly Coyle, author of three books set in Florida. The two writers, who both grew up in northeast Florida in the late 1950s, exchange poignant and provocative stories of life in Florida during the time when Jim Crow laws forced the blacks and whites to live parallel lives. Their experiences were the cover story in the summer 1999 issue of FORUM.

“Parallel Lives” schedule:

Boca Raton: Wednesday, February 16, 7:00 p.m.
Barry and Florence Friedberg Lifelong Learning Center, Florida Atlantic University, 561-297-1076

Lake Worth: Thursday, February 17, 1:00 p.m., The Watson B. Duncan III Theatre, 4200 Congress Avenue, 561-438-8186

Indiantown: Friday, February 18, 7:00 p.m.
Indiantown Middle School, 16303 S.W. Farm Road, 561-221-1403

Stuart: Saturday, February 19, 4:00 p.m.
Blake Library, 2351 S.E. Montgomery Road 561-221-1403

All Programs are free and open to the public.

FHC Grants Fund Public Programs

At its December meeting, the FHC board of directors awarded grants to fund a wide array of public humanities programs, including a reading and discussion series, an environmental history exhibit and a public television documentary. Totaling more than $136,000, these grants provide non-profit
circa 3000 B.C. Human habitation of the island begins. Over the millennia, a series of hunter and gatherer cultures will inhabit the island.

c. 500 B.C. St. John's culture emerges in northeastern Florida. St. John's settlements appear on the island as early as 300 A.D.

c. 1000 Native-American bands associated with the Timucuan mound-building culture settle on the island, which they call Napoyca. They will remain on Napoyca until the early 18th century.

1562 French Huguenot explorer Jean Ribault becomes the first (recorded) European visitor to Napoyca, which he renames Isle de Mai.

1564 French explorer René de Laudonniere founds Fort Caroline near the mouth of the St. Johns River.

1565 Spanish forces led by Pedro Menéndez de Avilés drive the French from northeastern Florida, slaughtering Ribault and approximately 350 other French colonists at Fort Matanzas, south of St. Augustine. Fort Caroline becomes Fort San Mateo.

1568 Seeking revenge for the Fort Matanzas massacre, Dominique de Gourgues leads a French-Timucuan naval assault on Fort San Mateo.

c. 1573. Spanish Franciscans establish the Santa Maria mission on the island, which is renamed Isla de Santa Maria.

1680 The Santa Maria mission, reduced to a small outpost of Yamasee converts living near Harrison Creek, is abandoned after the Yamasee refuse a Spanish order to relocate to the

Santa Catalina de Guale mission (on St. Catherine’s Island, Georgia).

1685 British raids force the relocation of the Santa Catalina de Guale mission, first to Sapelo Island, Georgia, and later to the site of the abandoned Santa Maria mission.

1696 The chronicler Jonathan Dickinson visits Santa Catalina mission.

1702 South Carolina’s colonial governor, James Moore, leads a joint British-Indian invasion of Florida, forcing the abandonment of Santa Catalina mission.

1736 Georgia’s founder and colonial governor, James Oglethorpe, renamed the island “Amelia Island” in honor of Princess Amelia (1710-1786). King George II’s daughter – even though the island is still a Spanish possession. After establishing a small settlement on the northwestern edge of the island, Oglethorpe negotiates with Spanish colonial officials for a transfer of the island to British sovereignty. Colonial officials agree to the transfer, but the King of Spain nullifies the agreement.

1742 During the War of Jenkins’ Ear, conflict between Britain and Spain prompts Oglethorpe to move his Amelia Island colony to Fort William on Cumberland Island.

1763 The Treaty of Paris ratifies Britain’s victory in the Seven Years’ War, ceding Florida to Britain in exchange for Havana and nullifying all Spanish land
grants in Florida. The Proclamation of 1763 establishes the St. Marys River as East Florida's northeastern boundary.

**1763-1770** The British Crown awards several Florida land grants, including 65,000 acres to John Percival, the second Earl of Egmont, who formulates plans for an agricultural colony at Mount Royal on the St. Johns River. After learning of Egmont's plans, East Florida's colonial governor James Grant adds most of Amelia Island—10,000 of the island's 11,500 acres—to the Egmont grant. In 1770, surveyors plat an Amelia Island town site (Egmont Town), but Egmont's death (December 1770) forestalls development.

**Florida's Sea Island**

**James Grant**

**1771** Executors of Egmont's estate order the abandonment of Mount Royal and the removal of his slaves to Amelia Island. Stephen Egan, who had worked for Egmont in Ireland, becomes manager of a sprawling Amelia Island indigo plantation owned by Egmont's heirs. Before long, the island boasts several other slave plantations.

**1774** Naturalist William Bartram visits the Egmont indigo plantation.

**1776** East Florida, including Amelia Island, becomes a haven for British Loyalists at the outset of the American Revolution.

**1777** Following a skirmish with Loyalist militiamen known as "Rangers," Colonel Samuel Elbert, a Patriot commander from Georgia, orders the burning of the Egmont plantation and every house on Amelia Island. The burning forces the island's inhabitants to flee, leaving Amelia virtually uninhabited for six years.

**1783** Second Treaty of Paris ends the Revolutionary War and returns Florida to Spain. British inhabitants of Florida, including a small band of former settlers on Amelia Island, must leave the province within 18 months unless they swear allegiance to Spain.

**1785** The final episode of the British evacuation occurs on Amelia Island when the outgoing British colonial governor, Patrick Tonym, and other British settlers board the HMS Cyrus for the voyage home. Mary Mattair, widow of a British Loyalist, and her two children, are among the few Britons to remain on the island.

**1787** Spanish authorities establish a garrison on the site of Mattair's bluff-top farm, compensating her with two land grants.

**1790** Domingo Fernandez, a Spanish-born sailor and pilot, establishes a homestead adjacent to Mattair's farm. Fernandez befriends Mattair, but she dies soon after his arrival. Fernandez later (1793) marries her daughter Maria.

**1791** Samuel and Isabel Harrison establish a slave plantation on the site of the Santa Catalina mission.

**1804** Zephaniah Kingsley, a British slave-trader and merchant, arrives in Florida and purchases four contiguous plantations (2,600 acres) along the western bank of the St. Johns.

**1807-09** Following passage of the Non-Importation Act (December 2, 1807) and the outlawing of the international slave trade (January 1, 1808), Amelia Island becomes a major smuggling and slave-trading center. By 1809, the ship count in the harbor often exceeds 300.

**1811** The surveyor George J. F. Clarke plats the town of Fernandina (which surrounds the Spanish garrison established in 1787), named in honor of King Ferdinand VII of Spain.

**1812-13** With the approval of President James Madison and Georgia governor George Mathews, insulated known as the "Patriots of Amelia Island" seize the island. After raising a Patriot flag, they replace it with the United States flag. American gunboats commanded by Commodore Hugh Campbell
maintain control of the island until Spanish pressure forces their evacuation in May 1813.

1814 Zephaniah Kingsley and his Senegalese wife, Anna Madameighest Jai Kingsley, establish a cotton plantation on Fort George Island.

1816 Spanish authorities complete Fort San Carlos, a ten-cannon fortification on Matlair bluff.

1817 Led by Gregor MacGregor, a Scottish-born soldier of fortune, 55 musketeers seize Fort San Carlos, claiming the island on behalf of the “Green Cross.” Spanish soldiers force MacGregor’s withdrawal, but their attempt to regain complete control is foiled by American irregulars organized by Ruggles Hubbard and former Pennsylvania congressman Jared Irwin. Hubbard and Irwin later join

David Levy Yulee

forces with the French-born pirate Luis Aubry, who lays claim to the island on behalf of the Republic of Mexico. In December, the U.S. Navy drives Aubry from the island, and President James Monroe vows to hold Amelia Island “in trust for Spain.”

1818 A U.S. Congress report condemns illegal slave-trading activities on Amelia Island.

1821 Following the First Seminole War, Florida becomes a United States territory.

1824 Fernandina becomes the seat of Nassau County.

1837 The Kingsleys abandon Fort George Island and emigrate to Haiti.

1838-39 Construction of Amelia Island lighthouse.

1847 Construction of Fort Duncan Lamont Clinch, named for an American general, begins.

1851 Senator David Levy Yulee selects Fernandina as the Atlantic terminus of a proposed cross-Florida railway, precipitating relocation of the town from the bluff area, later known as Old Town, to the present downtown site.

1858 Joseph E. Rogers founds the Fernandina Florida News.

1855-60 Construction of the 156-mile long Florida Railroad, linking Fernandina and Cedar Keys. The last segment of track is completed in June 1860. Between 1857 and 1859, the railroad builds the Florida House, Fernandina’s first hotel.

1860 Construction of the First Presbyterian Church.

1861 On January 8, two days before Florida's secession, Confederate sympathizers (the Third Regiment of Florida Volunteers) take control of Fort Clinch, already abandoned by the Federal workers who had been constructing the fort. General Robert E. Lee visits Fort Clinch in November 1861, and again in January 1862, during a survey of coastal fortifications.

1862 28 Union gunboats commanded by Commodore Samuel F. Dupont restore Federal control of the island on March 3.

1862-67 Amelia Island serves as a major haven for emancipated slaves and other refugees. Chloe Merrick, an abolitionist from New York and the future wife of Florida governor Harrison Reed, transforms Fernandina’s Episcopal church into a school for ex-slave and poor white children. She later turns Confederate General Joseph Finegan’s mansion into a racially integrated orphanage (moved to a site south of Jacksonville in 1866).

1868-1877 Black suffrage and black office-holding become common in Fernandina during Radical Reconstruction. Fernandina becomes the first predominantly African-American civil division in the United States to implement universal adult male suffrage.

1869 Fort Clinch, still unfinished, closes.

1872 David Yulee’s Florida Railroad is reorganized and renamed the Atlantic, Gulf, and West India Transit Company. Local Catholics construct St. Michael’s Church.

1876 The construction of a 2-story, brick building known as the Chandlery initiates a decade-long building boom in Fernandina.

1877 The Atlantic, Gulf, and West India Transit Company begins construction of a large tourist hotel, the Egmont. Later in the year, a severe yellow-fever epidemic leaves a trail of death and disrupted lives, but local investors go on to build several additional hotels, including the Strathmore (1881).

1879 The 75-room Egmont Hotel opens, spurring the town’s hopes of becoming “the Newport of the South.”

1880 Former President Ulysses S. Grant accompanied by General Philip Sheridan, visits Fernandina. David Yulee and his wife Nannie move to Washington after a corporate reorganization ends his control of

Fernandina Confederate Civil War veterans

Fort Clinch

XO. 385—OLD FERNANDINA, AMELIA ISLAND, LOOKING S. E., SHOWING THE OLD SPANISH TERRAPINS.
the railroad.

1886 Construction of a two-story, brick public school later known as the "Old Schoolhouse." 

1888 A yellow-fever epidemic strikes Fernandina for the second time in eleven years.

1891 Construction of the Nassau County Courthouse and the Trinity African Methodist Episcopal Church.

1893 The Cuban revolutionary leader Jose Marti (1853-95) visits Fernandina.

1898 Fort Clinch temporarily reopens during the Spanish-American War. Camp Amelia serves as a staging area for U.S. troops. A severe hurricane strikes.

1899-1915 Solicito Salvatoro (aka Mike Salvador), Salvatore Versaggi, Antonio Poli, and other Sicilian immigrants revolutionize the Florida shrimping industry. Salvador is the first Floridian to use a power-driven shrimp boat (1902), and he and others — including Dave Cook, Billy Corkum, William Jones Davis, and Salvatore Tringali — are among the first to use the otter trawl (c. 1913), which makes deep-water shrimping possible. By 1915, the local shrimp fleet includes Portuguese, Greek, Scandinavian, and German immigrants.

1900 Three brothers — John, Noble, and Ira W. Hardee — establish Standard Hardware Company.

1936-39 Fort Clinch is purchased by the State of Florida, which creates a 1,086-acre State park. Prior to the park's opening in 1939, a Civilian Conservation Corps restoration and improvement project transforms the area.

1937-38 During the Great Depression, two pulp mills begin operation in Fernandina. The Container Corporation of America mill opens in 1937, and the Rayonier Corporation mill in 1938.

1942-45 The U.S. Coast Guard maintains a surveillance and communication center at Fort Clinch.

1951 The legislature authorizes a name change: Fernandina becomes Fernandina Beach.

1954 The motion picture Naked Under the Sun, a dramatization of Seminole leader Osceola's imprisonment, is filmed at Fort Clinch.

1959 The Carnegie family's Dungeness mansion on Cumberland Island burns to the ground.

1963 Fernandina Beach celebrates its first annual Shrimp Boat Races Festival.

1964 Hurricane Dora inflicts considerable damage on the island.

1965 The desegregation of Nassau County Public Schools begins.

1971 Charles Fraser's Sea Island Company begins construction of Amelia Island Plantation, a 900-acre resort and residential complex.

1973 A 30-block area of Fernandina Beach is designated a Historic District in the National Register of Historic Places.

1974 Amelia Island Plantation opens. The Keystone Hotel is demolished.

1978 Charles Albert, a local science teacher, wins a seat on the Fernandina Beach City Commission. The first African American to hold elective office on the island in the twentieth century, he will remain on the council until 1996.

1979 The Amelia Island Museum of History, located in the Old Jail, opens.

1980 Amelia Island Plantation hosts its first Women's Tennis Association tournament, the Murjani Championship.

1985 Archaeological excavations at the site of the Santa Catalina mission begin. May venee Betsch, the great-granddaughter of A. L. Lewis, initiates the resurrection

Amelia Island Museum of History and environmental protection of American Beach.

1986 Summer Beach Resort and Country Club opens. The Nassau Terminals, Port of Fernandina, opens.

1987 The Fernandina Beach Historic District expands to 50 blocks to include Old Town. The movie, The New Adventures of Pippi Longstocking, is filmed at St. Joseph's Convent and Old Town.

1988 The Fernandina Beach "pogy plant" ceases operation.

1991 The Ritz-Carlton Hotel opens.

1997-98 Construction of a new bridge linking Amelia Island and Big Talbot Island.

1998 The 1891 County Courthouse closes. Patricia Thompson becomes the first African-American woman elected to the City Commission.

2000 Fernandina Beach hosts the Florida Humanities Council's annual Florida Gathering.

Raymond Arsenault is the John Hope Franklin Professor of Southern History, Director of the University Honors Program at the University of South Florida, St. Petersburg, and a 1965 graduate of Fernandina Beach High School.
Seven new condos rise on the dunes just south of Fernandina Beach.
you measured history per square mile, and graded it by the beauty of the natural backdrop, Amelia Island and Fernandina Beach might be able to claim the most spectacular heritage in Florida; and their future, filled with promise as well as jeopardy, might match it.

Eight national flags have flown over this magnificently beached and forested spit of land (see accompanying chronology), the most southern of the sea islands that trail down the Carolina and Georgia coasts.

For most of the century since the rough and tumble days, Fernandina Beach – once known as “Georgia Heaven” – has been a working-class community and
vacation haven, a home to workers in the pulp mills on its northern tip and to the fishermen and shrimpers who went to sea from the local docks.

More well-heeled visitors began coming in significant numbers in the 1970s, after the arrival of the beautifully landscaped Amelia Island Plantation, an environmentally concerned - and gated - community at the southern end of the island. Later the arrival of the high-rise Ritz-Carlton, a world-class resort, accelerated that trend. Because these visitors tended to remain mostly in their luxury surroundings, a division between new-old was created, at first a subtle one.

As the island grew more popular, the old balance changed. In recent years, the division grew into a cultural rift that has unsettled the island and produced social and economic clashes. Today, fondness for the easy lifestyle of a small southern town, which improvised if necessary to accommodate local taste and custom, bumps up against the clout of money and the seduction of status, which promise prosperity but require new rules. There might be little doubt about the eventual outcome, but in the meantime there is considerable anguish about the process.

Most of the elements of the discord have become familiar in Florida, where the flavor of growth has taken on a bittersweet taste. They include social ambitions for recognition and for the rewards consistent with living on a beautiful Florida island, fear of losing a comfortable lifestyle to what others see as progress, concern that tourism treat the island's rich history as more than just a quaint façade and a respect for the environment. On another level, the islanders want social and economic development that makes room for working people, respects racial differences, appreciates diversity, and deals with the prospect of rapid population growth.

So it goes from Fernandina's Old Town and Fort Clinch in the north to Centre Street and the 50-block

Al Burt, a retired journalist, who lives in Melrose, is the author of four books on Florida. His latest is Tropic of Cracker. Bob Self is a staff photographer at The Florida Times-Union in Jacksonville. In 1989 he received a Humanities Council grant to chronicle Amelia Island's American Beach.
Historic District with its splendid array of Victorian homes, all the way down Highway A1A to the south tip of the Island. Amelia Island, so long isolated and ignored in the extreme northeast of Florida (32 miles from Jacksonville) – a place that would have been part of Georgia if the border-marking St. Marys River had been less crooked – has become hot property. And the lust to develop has spread from it across the bridge at Nassau Sound into the next county past Little Talbot Island and the St. Johns River ferry to the marshes around the Kingsley Plantation at Fort George.

“We have really been discovered,” says Suzanne Davis Hardee, a seventh generation Floridian. All seven generations lived either on the island or nearby on the St. Marys River. The generational string continues among her five daughters and 11 grandchildren, though not all remain in Fernandina Beach. Her family founded a company that became Standard Marine Supply, which included the local shrimping industry among its customers. The company, now headquartered in Tampa but with outlets in Key West and Fernandina Beach, is 100 years old this year.

Hardee represents an influential “old Fernandina Beach” viewpoint. She has been one of the major figures in the rescue and preservation of local history. The Amelia Island Museum of History published her booklet, “The Golden Age of Amelia Island,” in 1993. “I do love this place,
“I do love this place, and always will, but not all of the changes.”

— Suzanne Davis Hardee

and always will, but not all of the changes,” she says.

Hardee enjoys the attention that Fernandina Beach gets, which has the effect of confirming and endorsing not only her own identity but her longheld belief that the island deserves greater prominence. She appreciates the more diverse social life and the wider horizons afforded by the luxury growth that newcomers have brought to the island. Still, some aspects of that growth disturb her sense of place. The easy confidence that was a part of the old Fernandina Beach vanished for her after a break-in, so now when she goes out now, even in the daytime, she activates a home security system.

In many ways, in fact, Hardee finds that strangers are rearranging her home town. A jarring example is a new four-story Hampton Inn rising on the riverfront, towering over the docks and the old railroad depot that houses the Chamber of Commerce, looking down upon the landmark (1878) Palace Saloon nearby. The Hampton Inn will be the tallest building on Centre Street, the quaintly revitalized main street of Fernandina Beach’s Historic District.

The Chamber of Commerce and downtown merchants organized and redesigned the street in the 1970s, adopting a flair that aped and enhanced history without being bound by it. Hardee and many others labored mightily for many years to recreate that street, to expand the Historic District (from the original 30 blocks to 50), and to insure that the appearance was historically appropriate. The Hampton Inn simply doesn’t fit.

There is more. Centre Street’s 1891 courthouse, whose restoration was another triumph for local historians, has been downgraded, in effect, to a substation by plans to build a new off-island courthouse near Interstate-95 at a community called
Along Centre Street are numerous antique shops (above) and St. Peter's Episcopal Church, dating to 1884, where pressed-glass cherubs peer from a stained glass window in the sacristy (left). Outside the historic area along A1A is the inevitable sprawl (top right).

Yulee. The building will remain, but stripped of its functional importance.

And the old Centre Street Post Office, a community meeting place where residents mingled when they went to pick up their mail, has been relegated to a supporting role by a new post office located away from the district on a street favored by the newer shopping malls.

These changes jolt Hardee's vision of old Fernandina Beach. "It just makes my stomach hurt," she says of the Hampton Inn. "I'm just grief-stricken." Changes in the courthouse and the post office, and the shift of Centre Street's business focus from community service to tourism, distress her as well. For old timers like Hardee, the area simply has received an unsettling new mix, neither all bad nor all good - just quite different, but threatening to get worse. So, for example, while she laments that someone might have difficulty finding a grocery to buy bread and milk in the Historic District, she also notes that there are 18 restaurants and many bed-and-breakfast hosteries, some of them rather elegant.

Partin's Shoes & Men's Wear, Eldridge Partin, proprietor, still does business at 313 Centre Street. He is one of the few members of that original 1970s merchant group to survive the tourist rush. When Partin's father went to work at the shoe store in 1907, it was a two-man operation, and it still is. His mother was a native of Crandall, just across the St. Marys River in Georgia. In 1913, the business became Partin's Shoe Store. After the elder Partin died, the son bought it from his mother. He now has turned over its management to his son-in-law.

"Business has changed. It's a tourist area," Partin says. "There are more gift shops and T-shirt shops now. In the '70s, we were worried about competing with the strip malls and about people going off the island to shop in Jacksonville. Most of the merchants from that time are gone now, closed up. The strip malls are larger than ever and there are more of them, but at least downtown hasn't died. It's still prosperous and active, just different. The value of these old buildings keeps going up. At these prices, I might be better off if I just sold the place."

The changes will accelerate. The city has plans to enlarge the Centre Street revitalization to include more streets.

Debates, if not political battle lines, have been drawn all over the island. In one way or another they touch almost everything. Historic focus resides in the north, first at Old Town, where in the 16th century a settlement was laid out along the deep natural harbor. In 1853, when Senator David Yulee wanted to build his cross-state railroad to Cedar Key on the gulf coast, Old Town seemed too inaccessible. Yulee's Florida Railroad Company bought land to the south and in effect created what today is Fernandina Beach. To the east, pre-Civil War Fort Clinch (construction began in 1847) anchors an 1,121-acre state park looking out on Cumberland Sound toward Georgia. On the park's beaches, visitors sometimes catch a startling glimpse of history's stretch: a nuclear submarine nosing into the sound, headed toward the King's Bay naval base just across the St. Marys River.

Pulp mills that rescued the economy of Fernandina Beach during the Depression (1936-37) neighbor
A Rare Opportunity to Visit Cumberland Island

This little Eden off the Florida-Georgia coast is a pristine island where ruins of magnificent mansions dot the landscape and wild horses still roam freely. Access to the island is heavily restricted, but we have chartered a boat for the special pre-Gathering program. Naturalists and historians will be the guides to this protected national treasure and the program will end with a poetry reading held at one of the island's spectacular and peaceful settings.

Dine with Harriet Beecher Stowe

Scholar and actor Betty Jean Steinshouer portrays the fiery abolitionist and author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Harriet Beecher Stowe in a performance developed especially for the Gathering. After the Civil War, Stowe moved to Mandarin, Florida, where she wrote "Palmetto Leaves," an account of the life and landscape of northeast Florida in the late 1800s. Join us for dinner at one of Fernandina Beach's finest restaurants, followed by the debut of this one-woman performance.

Hear the Rich History of American Beach

The subject of two recent books, American Beach was a popular seaside resort for African-American families during segregation. Restricted from most public beaches, African Americans flocked to this stretch of beach on Amelia Island with its turquoise waters and magnificent sand dunes. Today this beach community is threatened with extinction as large-scale beach development creeps around the coast. Our tour guides will be Mavynne Betsch, an environment activist, former opera singer and great granddaughter of American Beach's developer A.L. Lewis; and Marsha Dean Phelts, a librarian and author of the book *American Beach* for African Americans. They will recall the days when black celebrities strolled through town, the streets pulsed with the sounds of jazz and an orange stripe was painted down the ocean floor to keep black and white beach swimmers separate.

Visit Kingsley Plantation

Travel into Florida's past down the winding canopy road that leads to the Kingsley Plantation. The oldest plantation in Florida, this antebellum structure overlooks an exotic expanse of marshlands and the Fort George River. This was the home of Zephaniah Kingsley, a Scottish slave trader and his wife, African slave Anna Jai. University of North Florida historian Dan Schafer will guide us through the restored plantation house and tabby slave quarters and tell the fascinating story of Anna who became the mistress of the plantation and the progenitor of one of Florida's most fascinating families.
Visit Fernandina Museum and Take a Historic Walking Tour

Fernandina’s rich and colorful history will be revealed as we look at its first inhabitants, the now extinct Timucuan Indians, then move through the many governments and nations who claimed it, including France, England and Spain. By foot, we will explore the town’s 50-block historic district, which includes Florida’s first hotel, the Florida House, and oldest saloon, the Palace Saloon, and dozens of beautifully restored Victorian homes.

Take an Architecture Tour of Fernandina Beach

Stroll through this historic seacoast village with Amelia Island Museum of History director Ron Kurtz and museum docents to observe the town’s numerous architectural treasures. You will tour private historic homes and civic landmarks, churches and lovingly restored bed & breakfast inns. Learn about community efforts to preserve the nearly extinct architectural styles within this small seaside community struggling to retain its fragile sense of family, community, and historical integrity.

Experience “Parallel Lives”

Two noted Florida writers, one black and one white, come together to share coming-of-age stories in the segregated 1950s: Novelist Beverly Coyle, who grew up in Fernandina Beach, and St. Petersburg Times columnist Bill Maxwell, who grew up 50 miles away in Crescent City. They were the last generation of Floridians to graduate from segregated schools, drink from different water fountains and sit in separate sections of the bus. This profound and poignant exchange of stories gives us the opportunity to understand the effects of segregation and discrimination from each side of the color line.

Hear the Georgia Sea Island Singers

This internationally-acclaimed duo brings alive the spirited songs, games and dances created by slaves over 200 years ago and preserved in the isolated communities off the coast of Georgia and Florida. Cut off geographically from the mainland, the Sea Islands, of which Amelia Island is the southernmost, developed their own unique African-American culture, including their own language, Gullah, a mixture of English and African dialects.

Through their work songs, chants, stories and spirituals, The Singers provide a captivating look at how their ancestors endured the trials of slavery on southern plantations, while preserving a fascinating chapter of our state’s history.

Explore the Changes in Shrimping

Modern day shrimping techniques began in Fernandina Beach, and many families have worked in the shrimping industry for generations. We will explore this industry and its history with those who have lived it, discuss boat building with a man who learned the craft from his father and grandfather, observe net making techniques, and visit a work trawler. We will also explore how changes in the ocean’s environment and large-scale fishing industries have impacted both this old fashioned way of life and the ocean floor.

Bike to Fort Clinch

For a more personal glimpse of the area, bring your bicycle and ride down tree-lined roads to Fort Clinch, a fort built before the Civil War. The ride will also take us through Old Town, the original site of Fernandina Beach.

Visit Fort George Island

Fort George Island bears evidence of over 5,000 years of human habitation, including aboriginal shell mounds, traces of European colonies, plantation homes and slave cabins, and turn-of-the-century country clubs. Tour the island with a park ranger and an archeologist to learn about the people who came before us and the land on which they lived.
What happens now to famed American Beach, which sprang from the country’s racist past?

The oceanfront resort skyline south of town parts at one point to leave a notch for proud though modestly constructed American Beach, renowned as an African-American playground during the days of segregation when prejudicial laws denied blacks access to other public beaches. From all over the South, and even the nation, blacks vacationed at American Beach. When civil rights laws ended legal segregation, and other beaches became open, the Beach’s popularity eased off. As Amelia Island developed into a tourist destination, this piece of black heritage became at risk. Sandwiched between two great resorts, American Beach represented prime oceanfront opportunity either for expansion by those neighbors, or for a new rival to rise up between them.

The story was a natural for national media, and they responded. The survival struggle of American Beach proved to be the single most celebrated aspect of the island. The island’s other resorts routinely bought huge ads spreading their fame and inviting visitors. American Beach, spending nothing, became the subject of at least two books, many magazine and newspaper articles, and full-page newspaper layouts. Free forums of all sorts explored its situation and speculated on its chances for survival. For underdogs everywhere, it seemed to be a delicious exercise in democracy.

The book American Beach: A Saga of Race, Wealth and Memory by Russ Rymer (HarperCollins, 1998) framed the difficulties of American Beach as high drama fueled by racism and materialism. Another book, An American Beach for African Americans, by Marsha Dean Phelts (University Press of Florida, 1997), perfectly complemented Rymer’s dramatic presentation with a folksy, human story of fun and hardship in a special place. For Phelts, an elementary school librarian, American Beach was a family place.

Rymer’s heroine was tall, striking Mavynee Betsch, known locally as the Beach Lady, a woman distinguished not only by her clearly articulated opinions but by her appearance. The first sight could be a bit startling. Her hair comes down off her head and winds down her body in a roll five, maybe six feet long. On the day I saw her, she wore a button on her blouse: “Stop Fat Cats,” and flashed three to four-inch painted fingernails indicating she could scratch as well as talk. Her cultivated voice suggested confirmation of her assertion that she once sang opera in Europe. Though she spoke histrionically of oppression and her quixotic mission to save American Beach as a place predominantly for African Americans, her conversation bubbled with humor. Her serious message, probably by design, came out with a softening, impish charm.

“It’s fun being a rascal,” she says, chuckling, “but we’re politically correct now. We’re being studied to death. The students have discovered us and I’m most happy about that. White ones, too, doing doctoral dissertations. I give lectures now at public schools and universities.”

Betsch lives in a camper, or recreational vehicle, not far from the ocean, on Lewis Street, named for her great grandfather, A. L. Lewis, who founded American Beach in the 1930s. A little more than a year ago, a history professor from the area discovered she also was related to Zephaniah Kingsley, the slave-trad-
American Beach in 1935 (opposite page, top). Today, people come for the sense of history as much as they do for fun.
American Beach's most famous denizen Mavynee Betsch and her unique six-foot braids:

"It's fun being a rascal."

A string of small pennants, fluttering in the ocean breeze, decorate Betsch's camper. Bumper stickers plaster its sides: "Keep Your Laws Off My Body"; "Empty the Prisons - Make Room for Congress"; "Flush Rush"; "Politicians and Diapers Must Be Changed Often - and for the Same Reason." Across a side street, ignored by Betsch, a 'For Sale' sign had been posted in a yard by Nick Deonas Realty. (When asked about the future of American Beach, Deonas had offered a simple solution: "It's up to the people there. If you want to save it, don't sell it.")

Betsch has carried on an extraordinary range of activities in behalf of American Beach. "Oh, yes, this will remain predominantly African American. We're not all black here. We've got a white owner. I call him our 'token white.'" She enjoyed a chuckle over that.

"People used to come here for fun and now they're coming here for history," she says. "We have one house already on the National Register and the plan now is to get the entire area listed. It will happen." She encourages homeowners to write it into their wills that the property will remain in African-American hands. Talk of another Hilton Head on Amelia Island horrifies her. "That's a sad story what happened up at Hilton Head and on Daufuskie Island, too. I mean, that was disgusting," she says.

Across the street from the Betsch camper a huge sand dune rises to a height of 40 feet or more. She calls it Na Na, after an African goddess. "And guess what? She had two husbands, I love it. Greek goddesses are fun but African goddesses are even more rascally," she says. "Look at that thing," she says of the dune. "Isn't that unreal?" She calls all of American Beach a spiritual, sacred place but for her the dune is even more special.

"Climbing that dune is my religion. When I die, I want my ashes scattered there," she says. "If my ashes are there, I'll go with the wind."

Betsch is trying to persuade the state to buy the dune, owned by the Amelia Island Company, and make it a nature preserve. "The developers say, 'why do you want to save that dune?' I say, listen, for one reason, at least a third of the black folks in Jacksonville were conceived behind that dune."

Marsha Phelts grew up in Jacksonville but American Beach was a major part of her family life. "All my life I wanted a home there," she says. In 1988, she bought it. She decided she wanted to know more of the history of the land, and she encountered conflicting stories. She started doing research. It led to her book which wonderfully chronicles a way of life at American Beach, where there are some 100 homes today, including a few white homeowners.

"On the day we talked, her late model red Corvette sat in the yard, bearing a tag that says, "AM-BEACH." Her friend Ruth Waters came over and the two of them reminisced. Waters has organized a community development group to help American Beach retain its character. "It's a wonderful place," Phelts says. "We don't want to go anywhere else. We want to be able to continue our lifestyle. I don't know what the future will be. I just don't know, but we need to keep this as an affordable community to survive. That's a problem."

Across the street from her house is a maintenance yard for one of the resorts. Across her backyard there is a fence that separates her from the golf course of another resort. The fence irritates her. "There's something about it," she says. "They don't have a fence separating them from the highway (A1A) but they need one to separate me from their golf course. I don't like the feeling it gives me."

- Al Burt
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OF HISTORY

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Old Town, a modest 32-acre community listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Old Town’s streets still follow the pattern set when the Spanish platted it in 1811. At its heart a former Spanish parade ground fronts on the most visibly prominent structure in Old Town, an upright frame house painted pink and known as “the Captain’s House.” Old Town has 35 homes, most of them on peonias (lots) or media peonias (half-lots). Its choice location, history and modest circumstances have caught the attention of developers. Fernandina Beach hired a University of Florida professor of architecture, William L. Tilson, to put together a set of guidelines. They have been controversial.

Joan Altman, who owns the Captain’s House and who once operated it as a bed-and-breakfast with the help of her daughter, was prominent among those upset by the guidelines. “The density was too high,” she says. She and others worried that the guidelines were impractical in some particulars and would allow developers to change the nature of Old Town. Altman, whose taxes have tripled in the 12 years she has lived there, also was president of the local chapter of the Sierra Club.

The guidelines note “the relaxed lifestyle of Old Town” and call it “verifiably unique.” Tilson, who drew them up, waits to see whether they will be implemented. “The guidelines are controversial, particularly among the few people who think the town should remain as it is,” he says. But they have official favor.

“Everybody out there is resisting the guidelines but I am in favor of them and so is the city commission,” says Fernandina Beach Mayor Ronnie Sapp. “There were 10 families that were Old Town for years. It was separated away from the city. It had no sewers or paved roads and those people liked it that way. Things have changed now. Old Town’s unique and we want to preserve it, but at some time it probably will be developed to a greater degree than it is today.”

Like it or not, Old Town will be included in island changes.

Jim Corbett, a Fernandina Beach native, finds these changes hard to take.

“The town that I grew up in was a small town,” he says of Fernandina Beach. “The livelihood of those that lived here was directly related either to the fishing business (including shrimp) or to the pulp mills. We had some tourism but that was basically in the summertime. We had a lot of people from Georgia who owned cottages out on the beach. We had some come over from Jacksonville too but mostly they were from south Georgia. When Labor Day came, they’d all go back and you’d have the town all to yourself again.”

Corbett manages the Amelia River Warehouse & Wharf that grew out of the Nassau Fertilizer and Oil Co., known locally as the poggy plant, which his father ran before him. Founded in 1911, the plant pressed the fish menhaden (pogy) for oil and used the residue to produce feed. It quit operating in 1988 when company fishing boats could no longer catch adequate numbers of menhaden.
Challenging golf courses and spectacular ocean vistas (left) have lured the island’s new wealthy residents. But for long-time resident Jim Corbett (above), change has meant closing the plant his father ran before him that pressed menhaden fish (right) for its oil.

"These people coming in from the outside, their idea of real estate values and ours are not the same."

- Jim Corbett

which Corbett attributes to a combination of pollution, destruction of coastal habitat and overfishing. The plant, located on the water at the north end of the island, then went into the warehouse and wharf business.

Corbett speaks frankly and passionately about issues on the island. "You knew everybody in town. I mean everybody. I could ride down the street and point out every house and tell you who lived in it. If you went to the grocery store you’d stop and socialize with people. You walked into a restaurant you’d know just about everybody. It was a great atmosphere for families. I used to hate for my Mother to come back from Wednesday night bridge club because she’d want to know why I didn’t tell her about this and why I didn’t tell her about that, and what was so-and-so doing up at the school, and on and on. Not many secrets.

"In high school," Corbett continues, "we never had a girlfriend from Fernandina Beach in the summertime because there were too many of these Georgia girls down here. By the same token, the girls didn’t want any Fernandina Beach boys either because the Georgia boys were here.

"We could drive on the beach then, no restrictions like they’ve got now, and we could have parties. Oyster roasts down on the south end of the island, down around Peter’s Point (now a public park) and farther down at Belle Glade, isolated places then.

All that’s changed. Started to change in the early 1970s when Amelia Island Plantation came. Tourism started going year round."
Retirees and others came in here who didn’t have to work for a living. Gradual but definite change.

“These people coming in from the outside, their idea of real estate values and ours are not the same. Somebody that sold their house for $200,000 in New York comes down here and spends what we think is a fortune on a place, but it might cost only half of what he just got rid of.

“You’re beginning to see some kind of class warfare here. You have to have a certain level of income just to live here. The town that I grew up in relied heavily on industry. Kids I went to high school with either went into a family business or went to work for the paper mill or they had to leave town to find a job.

“A lot of people who live here now have to get up in the morning and leave the island to go to work. The jobs we’ve got, most of ‘em, are in the tourist industry. Not what most people would consider high-paying jobs. The people that work at those jobs probably can’t afford to live on the island. A lot of people live out there in the woods between here and Yulee.

“The island is slowly becoming another Hilton Head. There’s people on this island that would love to see these two paper mills close. They love to see the port go, too. But those are some of the high-paying jobs that are still here. That odor from the mills is a big thing. It always lays me out for somebody to come over that bridge and see the two paper mills and choose to live here – and then the first thing they want to do is complain about ‘em. If they didn’t like ‘em, there’s a lot of other places they could have gone. Same thing with the port. People complain about it because of all that truck traffic, and some of ‘em because it blocks their view of the river.”

The U.S. Navy invited Corbett and the company to bid on a drydock operation for their site. He thought he had an agreement that might work, but there was a local protest against it. He concedes some bitterness about that. “The town that I grew up in would have loved it,” he says. “Would have been 300 or 400 high-paying jobs. But that town doesn’t exist any more. There was quite a hullabaloo against it. Got real nasty.”

The bid failed. Another local initiative to bring a super Wal-Mart store to the island stalled before a local protest, Corbett says. “Those two industries, the drydock and a Wal-Mart superstore, involved people who are not upper class. These are people that put workboots on, wear dungarees, have grease under their
World-class resorts, such as Amelia Island Plantation (top, center) and the Ritz-Carlton (top, right), have helped change the economy from industrial to service, but the pulp mills (above) keep puffing.

While developers scrutinize every inch of the island, real estate values, taxes, and cost-of-living rise. As oldtime land owners succumb to the resulting push-pull, as working families seek more affordable locations, the island evolves into another kind of place.

"This is a working class community changing into a resort community," says Mayor Sapp, whose mother's family has lived in the area since 1793. He is a teacher in the public schools and has served on the city commission for 18 years. His father moved here from Chipley, in the Florida Panhandle, to work in the pulp mills.

"This had been a traditional southern community, but it's divided into factions now. When you grow, you diversify. The only people who ever came here before were from southeast Georgia. Same families, year after year. We looked forward to it. The resorts changed all that. People would visit, and then come back to stay. It changed the mix. The old families see that and regret it.

"They remember this as a working community. I'm concerned how fingernails. These are people who might live in mobile homes over at Yulee. Some people don't want 'em here. The island is getting fancier and fancier, and if you don't like it, then leave."
much longer working people will be able to afford to live here. But people who come in here from Connecticut or New Jersey think this is still cheap. Thank goodness for the pulp mills. As long as they’re here, they will slow things down.”

The modern shrimping industry, established at Fernandina Beach early this century when it moved its fishing from inshore to offshore with new techniques, has declined. “It’s still here but it’s a shell of what it used to be in the 1950s and 1960s,” Mayor Sapp says. “We still have shrimp boats but the land down at the docks has become so valuable I don’t know how long we can keep them.” Still, some two million pounds of shrimp are delivered to Fernandina Beach’s docks annually.

“With growth there’s a natural progression, like what happened in south Florida. People like myself and others on the city council do what we can, but economics are such a powerful force to deal with. All we can do is try,” the mayor says.

He notes that the County Tourist Development Council raises a million dollars a year, money which is used to attract still more people to the island. “The county spends that money to advertise the community,” he says.

In 1998, Fernandina Beach, concerned about growing political turmoil (including repeated turnovers of its city managers and police chiefs), asked the Florida Institute of Government, at Florida State University in Tallahassee, to review the situation. A report came back from Dr. Lance deHaven-Smith, professor and associate director of the institute, that outlined a split ideology between the city and the county.

The report’s comments included the following: “The roles of the citizens, the commissioners, the city manager, and the city staff have become blurred because Fernandina Beach is undergoing rapid and controversial change. In the past, the city was centered around commercial fishing and two paper mills. Today, however, it is increasingly becoming a destination of tourists and seasonal residents.... The city’s rapid transformation has not affected all of its citizens the same way. For some... (it) has brought economic opportunity and gain. For others, it has meant higher taxes and rent, and the loss of a slow-moving, settled way of life... Fernandina Beach has become much more complicated politically... economic and demographic groups all have somewhat different concerns and interests. Coalitions are unstable
"I used to be able to go to the grocery store and know nine out of ten people I saw. Now I'm lucky if I know one out of ten."

— Nick Deonas

Shrimp boats (far left) are still a common sight off Amelia Island, though rising land values ashore threaten the industry. Fisherman Jason Morgan shows off a catch of white shrimp (center), while Florida Marine Patrolman Tony Wright stops a boat for inspection (left).

Natives react to all these happenings with a range of emotions, including enthusiasm, wonder, puzzlement, and sometimes anger. It spills over into politics, where more and more the balance of voting power shifts across the bridges and off the island into mainland Nassau County, mostly around Yulee, a community loosely clustering near Interstate-95 but also spreading out into the intervening 14 miles between it and Fernandina Beach. Still farther west and north on U.S. 1, the towns of Callahan and Hilliard have similar appeal but are not as convenient to the island.

The economic and political power of Nassau County (est. pop. 56,000) traditionally resided in the county seat Fernandina Beach, but as working people found the off-island lifestyle and cost of living more inviting, the numbers changed. While the economic clout still has island focus, figures compiled in November at the office of the Nassau County Supervisor of Elections show 13,447 registered voters residing on Amelia Island (including Fernandina Beach) and 18,263 in the rest of the county. The county grows at an estimated 2.8 per cent per year, and that trend in voter residence is expected to increase. Of the 31,710 total Nassau County registered voters, 16,179 were Democrats, 12,420 Republicans.

The problem reflects an uneven sharing in the new prosperity. Some, particularly working people and old timers, question whether they personally are gaining or losing with the island's new economic direction. Grumbling and a variety of conflicts, social and political as well as economic, come out of this in ways that harmonize with Amelia's hectic history.

"Growth is so rapid that it's scary," says Nick Deonas, Nassau County Commissioner. With him, too, loss of the small town atmosphere is important. "I used to be able to go to the grocery store and know nine out of ten people I saw. Now I'm lucky if I know one out of ten." He predicts that the trend will only increase. "Life as we know it today will not exist in 36 to 60 months with the growth we have coming. It's almost impossible to respond to this kind of growth."

Deonas, a native of Fernandina Beach, owns the Nick Deonas Realty Co., which has multiple offices. His father was a Greek boat builder who moved to the United States during World War II. His mother's father was also a Greek boat builder. As a young man Nick, too, built shrimp trawlers in Fernandina Beach, big handcrafted wooden boats that cost $1,000 a foot. "Nobody does that any more," he says.

With the number of fishing boats dwindling, and the arrival of fiberglass and steel hulls, he gave up boatbuilding to work in the local fire-rescue service, dabbling in real estate on
The endless variety of beach life helps make the island a special place.

When you cross the high bridges to go onto Amelia island, you enter a separate land, once blessed and cursed by geographic isolation, now blessed and cursed by discovery and popularity. Some of nature’s finest natural poetry survives and some of Florida’s most intriguing history remains intact.

Wide beaches on the east frame the Atlantic Ocean, where shrimp boats prowl among the whitecaps, whales calve in the fall and sea turtles nest in the summer. The Amelia River and a long sweep of salt marshes, looking a bit like mislocated western prairies, act as a moat against the mainland west. Forested dunes anchor the middle, offering haven to birdlife. For all history the fortunes of Fernandina Beach rose and fell as regularly as its spectacular tides. When high, they came up six feet or more and flooded those marshes and set off a jubilee of marine life; then, the tide would fall and the mudflats would emerge and smell strong and all the little sea creatures would flounder. So it seemed with Amelia Island, always up and then down.

Now it’s up, perhaps never to go down again. In the most impressive way seen here since the days of sailing ships and steam locomotives, the historic little city and island have been anointed with a full share of Florida’s Boom.

Maybe whacked would be a better word.

The endless variety of beach life helps make the island a special place.

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Maybe whacked would be a better word.

Elected at-large, the courthouse is in his district. To achieve additional space for the courthouse, some wanted to expand the old one in the Historic District. After a lot of wrangling, a split decision was recommended that reflected new political realities: there would be two courthouses, a new and larger one at Yulee where other new county functions are being housed, with the old one to remain open but with a reduced role.

“People come in here and say I’m here now, blow the bridge up, but growth can’t be stopped,” he says.

“There are property rights involved. There is a right to develop. We can put in regulations stringent enough that the growth provides services for itself.”

He added, “The number one issue is the courthouse,” though he is elected at-large, the courthouse is in his district. To achieve additional space for the courthouse, some wanted to expand the old one in the Historic District. After a lot of wrangling, a split decision was recommended that reflected new political realities: there would be two courthouses, a new and larger one at Yulee where other new county functions are being housed, with the old one to remain open but with a reduced role.

“There are 22 attorneys with offices near the old courthouse. That’s the problem,” Deonas says. “They don’t want to go out to Yulee.”

BOOK BRIEFS

Idella Parker: From Reddick to Cross Creek with Bud and Liz Crussell

Reviewed by Betty Jean Steinshouer

Idella Parker: From Reddick to Cross Creek with Bud and Liz Crussell

156 pages. University Press of Florida. $19.95

From Reddick To Cross Creek is the second slim volume from University Press of Florida about Idella Parker, whom Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings once called her perfect maid. Co-writers Bud and Liz Crussel from Ocala do a good job of putting Idella’s memories in roughly chronological order. The death of Rawlings’ husband, Norton Baskin, six months into the project, no doubt had an influence on its outcome, for Idella could now retell most of her original stories without filtering them, as Mr. Baskin had asked.

There is more of Idella’s own life here than in the first book, which keeps it from being just another opportunity for her to vilify her former employer. Still, Idella seems to blame Rawlings for all the ills of a racist society, besides portraying her as an even worse drunk than before. The book shows all the problems of communication and misunderstanding that can happen between the races, even when people love each other. Clearly, whatever Rawlings provided for Idella wasn’t enough – education, a car to drive, nice clothes, furniture and one of the highest wages she could earn anywhere. Idella still compares working for her to being a slave on a plantation.

One hopes that Idella gets to read some of the 700 or so new letters added to the Rawlings Collection at the University of Florida since the death of Norton Baskin. Perhaps Idella would like to know that, at one point in their up-and-down relationship, the Baskins discussed making provisions in Rawlings’ will for Idella to have a farm, and that the author, late in life, wrote to Adam Clayton Powell’s magazine called The Peoples Voice, a black publication, after The Yearling was criticized for its racist language. Rawlings denounced the use of the word “nigger” in public or private, for herself and for all thinking people.

Scholar and actress Betty Jean Steinshouer travels the country portraying Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings.
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