



The Historical Quarterly

of The St. Lucie Historical Society, Inc.

Vol. 40 No. 3

Summer 2022

Officials and friends honor Lucille Rights for distinguished career

Relatives and friends of **Lucille Rieley Rights** recently joined St. Lucie County officials in honoring her for more than a half-century of contributions to the preservation of local history. On April 19 the County Commission approved a resolution praising her “faithful and dedicated service.”

The proclamation saluted Lucille Rights as “one of the Treasure Coast’s most prominent historians” and as an “educator, author, archaeologist and volunteer.”

Her enthusiasm for Florida’s history is well known to many local residents, especially those who were among her students during a long career as a teacher in the public schools. She is the author of *A Portrait of St. Lucie County, Florida*, widely regarded as the best overview of this area’s history. She also has published numerous articles for the public and historical guides for teachers.

She is a longtime member and past president of the St. Lucie Historical Society, and was a leader in campaigning to reopen the St. Lucie County Regional History Center in 2010 after it had been closed due to county budget problems. She also helped to arrange the return of Spanish 1715 treasure fleet artifacts on loan from the state.

She also has contributed to preserving historical resources relating to St. Lucie Village and to the U.S. Army’s Fort Pierce which existed during the Second Seminole War.

Several dozen admirers were present in the commission chamber on the morning of April 19 when the resolution was adopted. Later that morning, Lucille Rights was congratulated at a reception in the historical center museum on Seaway Drive.



County Commission Chairman Sean Mitchell presents the official resolution to Lucille Rights on April 19 in the commission chamber in Fort Pierce.

Photo by Erick Gill, County Staff.



Lucille Rights celebrates with daughter Roberta Murray and others at a reception in the St. Lucie County Regional History Center on Seaway Drive.

Photo by Ted Burrows.

Welcome - New Members

Sue Favorite, Membership Chairman

New members: Rebecca Maggart, Loretta Stafford,

Jane & Terry Maheuron

The Society is a Florida Corporation exempt from federal income tax under section 501(a) of the Internal Revenue Code as an organization described in Section 501(c)(3). The Society is also classified as a public charity under 509(a)(2).

The Historical Quarterly
of The St. Lucie Historical Society, Inc.

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The President's Message

by Nancy Bennett

We hope all of you are enjoying a pleasant summer and will rejoin us in the fall for another season of enjoyable dinner meetings with interesting speakers.

Lately, things have been busy at the museum. We continue to receive a steady flow of visitors, not only local people but also vacationers from elsewhere in the U.S. and foreign countries.

In the historic Gardner house, a generous donation by SLHS member **Norma Cassens Axx** has made possible the repainting of the house interior. We all are very grateful for her contribution. The painter, **Brant McManus**, did a fine job and the new coating gives the walls a cleaner, fresher look. Next time you're at the museum, make sure you look in the Gardner house.

Your SLHS board is considering a plan to hold a local history fair at the museum this coming winter, most likely in January. Potentially, attendees could tour the museum and enjoy displays and activities outside on the grounds. Many details need to be worked out, so nothing is definite yet. By this fall we hope to report more details to all our members.

Enjoy the summer. See you in September. Δ

Bulletin Boosters

Help support a lively and useful SLHS Historical Quarterly. A \$10 donation will add your name to the Bulletin Boosters roster for a full year of Quarterly editions. Please give your \$10 donation to Treasurer Bob Burdge. Many thanks. Names of current bulletin Boosters are listed below (with expiration month and year).

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Deborah & Stephen Billis -----4/23	Robert & Louise Summerhays----- 10/22	Beverly Traub-----7/23

Old-time license plates held clues to Florida geography

by Ted Burrows

It used to be a familiar childhood game – trying to spot the most distinctive license plates as we rode with our parents in the family car. For kids in Florida, the game usually was to count the number of different counties represented. For almost four decades – 1938 through 1976 – each county had a different number prefix visible to sharp-eyed youngsters. They could even learn a bit about Florida’s geography that way.

Collecting antique auto license plates is a popular hobby nationwide. Collectors buy, sell or trade rare specimens and share information through club magazines. Here are some facts about Florida’s old-time license plates, gleaned from publications of the Automobile License Plate Collectors Association.

Florida began auto registration in 1905 and owners were required to attach their own number tags. From 1911 through 1917 the state required each county to issue license plates and some cities also did so. There were different fees and different designs, many were made of porcelain and some were steel or brass. Procedures were inconsistent.

In 1918 Florida became the last of the lower 48 states to require state-issued license plates. They differed in size and some included weight or horsepower designations.

A big change occurred in 1938 when Florida adopted a county numbering system, ranked from the largest to the smallest. The ranking evidently was based on the 1937 vehicle registration figures, though most Floridians assumed it simply was based on population.



*Old auto license plates from this area.
At top is a 1968-69 St. Lucie County plate;
below is an Indian River County 1955 plate.
From the David W. Burrows collection.*

Unsurprisingly, Dade (Miami), Duval (Jacksonville) and Hillsborough (Tampa) counties were numbered 1, 2 and 3. Little Liberty County in the panhandle was numbered 67, last among Florida’s counties. Other notable county numbers were Leon (Tallahassee) at 13 and Orange (Orlando) at 7.

Residents of this part of Florida soon memorized the numbers of St. Lucie (24), Indian River (32), Martin (42) and Palm Beach (6).

In addition to the county numbers, the state’s car tags included weight designations. Most cars had “plain” tags with no letters; very lightweight compact cars had the letter D; large, heavy cars (usually the luxury brands) carried W or even WW letters.

One license tag oddity was in 1943 when the state did not issue new plates because of the wartime conservation of steel. Instead, the state produced small metal tags saying “1943.” Motorists attached them to their existing 1942 tags.

Changes occurred gradually. All license plates were of steel until 1974 when aluminum came into use. Through the 1970s and 1980s, new designs were tried featuring different colors for the base and lettering. An orange was depicted and slogans such as “In God We Trust” or “Sunshine State” could be chosen. The new license plates lasted for multiple years, with annual renewal stickers affixed. Now there’s a wide array of specialty license plates available (generally for charity fundraising) and even the run-of-the-mill car tags bear only slight resemblance to those of yesteryear. Δ

Florida Facts

An epidemic of yellow fever swept Jacksonville in the summer of 1888. By mid-August residents were panic-stricken and many fled, by boat, railroad, wagons and on foot. From an earlier population around 130,000, Jacksonville’s inhabitants dwindled to about 14,000 by September. Barricades on roads failed to stop the migration. Nearby towns set up quarantine stations. The

outbreak lasted until November, costing about 400 lives.

On July 1, 1898 American soldiers battled Spanish forces on San Juan Hill and Kettle Hill in Cuba, and people in Florida eagerly read newspaper accounts of the fighting. Most of the Americans had trained at bases in Florida, including Tampa, Miami, Fernandina and Lakeland.

Famed educator Bethune statue now graces U.S. Capitol

The long-awaited statue of Florida's much-admired educator **Mary McLeod Bethune** now occupies an honored place in Statuary Hall of the U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C.

Each state is allowed to have two of its outstanding citizens depicted in the hall. The other Florida statue is of **John Gorrie, M.D.**, whose pioneering work on mechanical refrigeration in the 1800s aided the development of air conditioning.

Mary McLeod Bethune, born July 10, 1875, founded the Daytona Educational and Training School for Negro Girls in October 1904 with initial financial resources totaling just \$1.50. Through the years, despite many hardships, she guided the growth of the institution into what is now Bethune-Cookman University. She also became a leading national spokesperson for African-Americans and an advisor



The new statue of Mary McLeod Bethune is now on display in the U.S. Capitol.

to the Franklin Roosevelt administration.

The new Bethune statue, created by sculptor **Nilda Comas**, is of marble, standing 11 feet tall and weighing more than 6,000 lbs. Mary Bethune is shown in cap-and-gown academic regalia, smiling broadly and holding a rose and a walking stick.

The statue originally was scheduled for unveiling at the Capitol in January but concerns over COVID forced postponement until May. Before being taken to Washington, D.C. the statue was temporarily displayed in Daytona Beach where Mrs. Bethune spent most of her career.

An earlier statue in the hall depicted another Floridian, Confederate General **Edmund Kirby Smith**. It has been removed, replaced by Mrs. Bethune.Δ

Back issues of SLHS Quarterly sought to complete our files

In recent years we have compiled a collection of past editions of the SLHS Quarterly and have organized them by year, dating back to 1982. Our files contain no back issues prior to that time.

Past editions are valuable in themselves as historical resources because they tell what our predecessors were interested in and concerned about during their years in the historical society. These pages from the past may give us ideas for topics we could examine again.

Since around 2014 we have been saving a half-dozen

copies of each edition in our files, so the years 2014-2022 are not a problem. We'd like to have additional copies of editions between 1982 and 2013. We know that in some years, editions were haphazard and inevitably there will be some gaps. We'll do the best we can.

If any of our members have back issues of the Quarterly, dated 2013 or earlier, please let us have them for our files. We can make copies if you want to keep the originals. Bring them to the next dinner meeting or phone the museum to let us know you have them. Thanks. Δ

Remembrances

Marilyn Minix

Longtime SLHS member **Marilyn Jane Minix** died on April 12 following several years of declining health. A native of Michigan, she was born Oct. 10, 1939 and became a Florida resident at age 21.

She had a successful career in business, including the operation of the Road Runner Travel Resort north of Fort Pierce. She was active in several local civic organizations. A former board member of the historical society, she devoted much time and energy to its service programs.

She was predeceased by her husband, former County Commissioner **James Minix**. Survivors include a son, **Sean Minix**; a daughter, **Theresa Minix Fowler**; plus 10 grandchildren and two great-grandchildren.

Polly Ann Moore

Polly Ann Summerlin Moore, a former historical society member and descendant of a prominent pioneer family, died May 24 at age 93. She was born Dec. 21, 1929 in St. Lucie Village to **Benjamin** and **Sara Summerlin**.

She was a lifelong St. Lucie County resident who greatly enjoyed sharing her knowledge of local history with others.

She was predeceased by her husband, former St. Lucie County Fire Chief **Donald B. Moore** and by a son, **Donald B. Moore Jr.** She is survived by three daughters and one son.

Tom Thurlow

Thomas Henry Thurlow Jr., a prominent attorney on the Treasure Coast, died April 22 at age 85. He was born Dec. 31, 1936 and his family moved from New York to Stuart in 1952. He was a star athlete at Stuart High School and class valedictorian in 1954.

After earning his law degree at the University of Florida, he and his wife **Sandra Henderson Thurlow** returned to Stuart in 1965. The two became avid researchers and sharers of this area's history. In 2011 Tom Thurlow published a book on The Early Lawyers of Martin County. His wife is the author of several books on historical topics.

Tom Thurlow was well respected in the legal profession and a leader in many civic organizations. He also served on the Indian River State College Board of Trustees. He is survived by his wife Sandra, two daughters, one son and six grandchildren. Δ

Feedback

Here are some recent visitors' comments about the St. Lucie County Regional History Center, compiled from the guest book:

Larry & Lora Deese, Fairmont, WV: "Wonderful museum with excellent staff!"

Orgen A. Martinez, Stuart: "Amazing history & displays."

Theresa Rust, Port St. Lucie: "Amazing!! My boys loved this."

Lena, Harper & Austin Crowe, Atkins, AR: "Wonderful museum! We loved the treasure museum."

Amanda Lawson, Okeechobee: "Thank you Nancy & Jon!"

Jayde Graham & kids, Bethlehem, GA: "Lovely, very educational."

Emilia Guerrero, Miami: "Lovely museum"

Chung Family, Port St. Lucie: "Enjoyed all the history, stories & artifacts."

Dallin & Holly Chase, Green Cove Springs: "Amazing, we will be back."

Keith Mille, Tallahassee: "Awesome!"

Sandy Ruhlander, South Chicago Heights., IL: "So much history. Thank you!" Δ

Florida Facts

In April 1956, Elvis Presley's first No. 1 hit on the Billboard chart was "Heartbreak Hotel" – a song written by a Jacksonville woman, **Mae Boren Axton** and a local musician, **Tommy Durden**. Mrs. Axton went on to write more than 200 songs, at least 14 of which became hits. She was the mother of popular country music star **Hoyt Axton**.

On June 17, 1942 four German saboteurs landed from a submarine along Ponte Vedra Beach near Jacksonville as part of Operation Pastorius, a plan to create confusion among Americans. They were to link up with another four saboteurs who landed on Long Island, N.Y. Not very skilled, they failed in their mission. One man, **Walter Dasch**, decided to expose their operation to the FBI. The saboteurs were arrested and tried by a military tribunal. Six were convicted and executed. Two men, **Dasch** and **Ernst Burger** (who was an American citizen) were imprisoned but returned to Germany after the war.

St. Lucie Historical Society, Inc.
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St. Lucie Historical Society, Inc.

Please join us in preserving our local heritage for future generations.

Name _____

Spouse's Name _____

Names and ages of minor children:

Address _____

City/State/Zip _____

Home Telephone _____

Business Telephone _____

Cell _____

Email _____

I/We wish to join the Society at the level indicated below.
Membership is from September through August.

New Renewal Individual (\$20.00)

Family (\$25.00) Business (\$50.00)

Please make checks payable to:

St. Lucie Historical Society, Inc
P O Box 578

Fort Pierce, Florida 34954-0578

For Information telephone: (772) 461-8020

General Meetings are held at:

The Elks Lodge

635 South 5th Street

Fort Pierce, Florida 34950

Society General Meetings are held on the 3rd Thursday of the month, from September through May. A meal is provided before the meeting at the price of \$13.00 per person. Reservations must be made for these meals no later than two days in advance of the meeting. To make reservations telephone (772) 461-8020 and leave a message. Reservations and your RSVP information by e-mail to: dinner@stluciehistoricalsociety.net. Dinner begins at 5:30 P.M. and the General Meeting Starts at 6:00 P.M.

Volunteers are Needed

If you have 3 1/2 hours that you can give once a week either in the morning or afternoon, please consider volunteering at the Museum.

Admission, to the museum, for St. Lucie Historical Society members is FREE. So come and take a tour.

The latest exhibit is St Lucie Families-Crafters of Local History.

The Pineapple Patch Gift Shop has a large selection of books of Florida historical value, cards, handmade Seminole Indian dolls, and baubles made by volunteers.

Museum Hours:

Tuesday through Saturday, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.