



# The Historical Quarterly

of The St. Lucie Historical Society, Inc.

Vol. 42 No. 3

Summer 2024

## Turpentine was important industry in Florida but blighted by danger, injustice to laborers

By Rick Modine



*Turpentine mill near Marianna in northern Florida, about 1910*

Turpentine became a valuable resource at a time when it was replacing whale oil. Turpentine was also becoming valuable as naval stores along the eastern United States seaports. The pine pitch was used to caulk the seams of the wooden ship hulls and preserve the ship's riggings. Turpentine was also being used as an ingredient in paints, soaps, medicines as well as other products. Turpentine advancements may well have saved many species of whales in the 1800's because the whaling ships were having to go on 3-year voyages to find new whaling grounds. New procedures for extracting pine resin may also have saved many species of pines from extinction as well.

The turpentine industry was Florida's second largest industry behind citrus for many years. The longleaf pine was called the "turpentine tree" and was also resistant to small wildfires.

Turpentine collection started in the colonial Carolinas and made North Carolina the largest pine pitch exporter in the world in the 1800's. The Tar Heel State's pine trees fell victim to harmful extraction

practices which made the trees susceptible to disease and death of their forest.

In search of new forests, investors came to Florida where the poor soil for farming was perfect for pines. One investor from Chicago came here in 1880 to make his fortune and bought 122,000 acres at 25 cents per acre for a grand total of \$30,500. In today's dollars, that comes to \$987,785.81.

When you see a dead lighter tree, it is the resinous part of the tree after the outer bark has rotted off. This is what the distillers were after. The laborers would cut or "blaze" a tree, to cut out a box at the base of the pine to collect the resin. Trees were usually "boxed" between November and March, then collected after the resin ran for a year. It was then dipped out and put into barrels to be hauled for distilling. Hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of Long Leaf Slash, Loblolly and Ponderosa pines were subject to this very labor-intensive process.

The turpentine business was going to suffer the

*... continued on page 3*

## Welcome - New or Returning Members

Sue Favorite, Membership Chairman

New or Returning members since May 2024

Suzanne Varn • John & Karen Hening

Chuck & Diane Benway • Ellen Gillete • Mark Tripson

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. Officers and Board of Directors

**President:** Nancy Bennett

**First Vice President:** Terry Howard

**Second Vice President:** Sue Favorite

**Recording Secretary:** Deborah Billis

**Corresponding Secretary & Programs:** Robyn Hutchinson

**Treasurer:** Bob Burdge

**Parliamentarian:** Roger Miller

**Historian:** Roberta Murray

Jon Bell, Nancy Bennett, Deborah Billis, Bob Burdge, Ted Burrows,  
Tish Taylor Chapman, Carolyn Dodge, Sue Favorite, Terry Howard,  
Robyn Hutchinson, Norma McGuire, Ernie Merrill, Roger Miller,  
Rick Modine, Roberta Murray

#### The Historical Quarterly Staff

**Editor:** Ted Burrows

**Staff:** Sue Favorite, Terry Howard, Rick Modine,  
Katy Purcell, Mary Schrader

**Disclaimer:** The views and opinions expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinion of The St. Lucie Historical Society, Inc., P O Box 578, Fort Pierce, Fl. 34954, Telephone (772) 461-8020, stluciehistoricalsociety.net

## The President's Message

by Nancy Bennett

In this hot season there isn't much to say except: Keep cool! We hope you all are enjoying some time off for fun with family and friends.

During the summer months your board of directors will be generating ideas for future activities, dinner speakers and more. We invite every SLHS member to offer suggestions.

This is a good time to extend our gratitude to the dozens of dedicated volunteers who keep the society's operations going throughout the year. Thank you and thank you again! We appreciate everything you do.

The museum continues to be busy, with summer camp youth groups visiting along with the public. Our museum is a popular place and always draws high praise.

Let's all come back in September refreshed and full of enthusiasm. Until then, relax and keep cool! 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).

Lynn Norvell-----4/25	Susan Roberts----- 10/24	Mike & Peggy Monahan -----7/25
John Honea -----4/25	Elizabeth Trachtman ----- 10/24	Carolyn Dodge -----7/24
Beate Hunton -----4/25	Victor & Cheryl Rowe----- 10/24	Teri Horn -----7/25
Barbara Secor -----4/25	Terry Sisson----- 10/24	Ernie & Judy Merrill -----7/24
Greg & Nancy Ryder -----4/25	Pam & Cole Harned-----7/24	Holly Theuns -----7/26
Sid Joiner-----4/25	Leonard & Peggy Berg -----4/24	Bob Burdge ----- 10/24
Norma Axx -----4/25	Bill & Beverly Theiss -----4/24	Katy Purcell-----4/25
Janis Brown -----4/25	Terry & Fannie Howard----- 10/24	Bonnie Reynolds ----- 10/24
Thomas Bailey-----4/25	Robert & Carolyn Lloyd -----4/25	Jon & Maura Stanko----- 10/24
Norma McGuire-----4/25	Sallie Ventresco----- 10/25	Janice Zahrly-----4/25
Maureen Ware ----- 10/24	Ann Cali -----4/25	Michael J. & Elaine Brennan -----4/25
Adele Lowe ----- 10/24	Pommie Hardie-----4/25	Sharman Mullins ----- 10/24
Michael & Earlene Hucks -----1/25	Roger Miller ----- 10/25	Jean Spivey-----4/25
Grace Scott----- 10/25	Matt & Crystal Samuel ----- 10/24	Betty Jo Starke ----- 10/24
Larry & Pam Blandford ----- 10/24	Larry Hardie----- 10/25	Bill & Letha Fowler-----4/28
Herb & Judith Bopp ----- 10/24	Pat & Laura Murphy ----- 10/24	Clay Yates -----4/24
Carl Heasley -----0/24	Peggy & Robert Allen -----4/25	Robyn Hutchinson -----6/25\
Sally & Jesse Porter ----- 10/24	Robert & Louise Summerhays----- 10/24	

*TURPENTINE ... continued from page 1*

same fate as the Carolinas had it not been for **Dr. Charles Hertz** who came up with the eco-friendlier extraction method in the early 1900's. It was less labor intensive and less harmful to the trees. His method was a cup and gully system. The laborer blazed the tree and installed a metal gutter that directed the flow into a container where the pine pitch was collected. The Hertz Turpentine Cup Co. was formed and produced terracotta pots for this purpose. You can still find blazes with metal gutters and Hertz Cups on old trees under state protection today.

The pine pitch had to undergo a distillation process to make it into a usable product. Small "stills" were built near harvest areas. These small still camps were abandoned by the 1930's for large distillery plants and the still camps that were scattered all over the state. These towns were usually near rail lines so the barrels of pitch could be transported easier.

After enough resin had been collected, it had to go through a process to separate the impurities. To get the turpentine oil, it was boiled in a still where the volatile turpentine oil vaporizes, where the vapor condensed and came out as oil, leaving the impurities in the steel pots. After the distillation process was completed, the turpentine oil was packaged into different sized bottles and cans for individual uses and industrial sized containers for industry applications. The turpentine oil was then chemically altered for medical applications, paint, and varnish as well as other solvent derivations.

Some of the darkest days of our state came when the labor was needed to get the product to market. Men were hired to work and brought their families. They were underpaid in company camps and with company money and did all their trading with the company store. The problem was they were usually in debt because of the high prices and fees and weren't allowed to leave until they worked off their debts to feed and house their families. Hence the term, "I owe

my soul to the company store".

The camps needed more labor and local law enforcement would often arrest "rail riders", vagrants and many other petty offenders. If they couldn't pay their fines, they were sent to camps under armed guard. The crooked officials got kickbacks for providing this new labor force, but it still wasn't enough labor. This is where the most egregious sins began to happen.

Penal servitude and peonage was the use of convicts from Florida's prisons who were not paid but sent to serve out their sentences under brutal armed guards. The Florida prison's received some money for state funds, but the greatest graft went in cash payments to the wardens and their cronies as well as politicians where camps were, in exchange to

look the other way. Every state and local politician had their hand out.

A powerful state senator, **Thomas Jefferson Knabb** built one of the largest turpentine empires in the country and owned over 200,000 acres in Baker County. There were nine deaths in a single year at one of his camps with all the deaths listed as natural causes by the

county coroner. An investigation was started and found that an additional 21 had died in the year preceding the investigation. A week before the trial, an African American woman who was scheduled to testify was shot and killed along with her daughter by the camp warden.

A prison inspector for the state declared the camps he visited as "human slaughter pens." One of the camp's captains was indicted for cruel and inhumane treatment of prisoners. Senator Knabb was allowed to continue with state convicts, provided camp conditions were improved. Efforts to remove him from office failed because he was so well connected.

At the end of the 1923 Florida legislative session, they abolished the beatings, the whipping of inmates and the leasing of inmates to private industry.



*Chain gang of turpentine laborers, northern Florida, early 1900s*

*... continued on page 5*

# Remembrances

## Patricia Teague Modine

Member of a prominent pioneer family and longtime historical society member **Patricia “Pat” Teague Modine** died June 9 at age 83.

She was born Oct. 22, 1940, to **Robert E. Teague Jr.** and **Ruby Carlton Teague**. She was a fourth-generation Florida Cracker and a lifelong Fort Pierce resident. She was a teacher’s aide in the St. Lucie County school system.

Her community involvement included membership in the First Baptist Church, continuing a family tradition that began with a great-grandmother who was among the founders. She also was active in the St. Lucie Historical Society, the St. Lucie County Fair Association, the Rocking Horse 4-H Club, St. Lucie County Cowboy Club and Cow Belles.

Survivors include her son **Richard “Rick” Modine, Jr.** (and wife **Lisa**) and grandchildren **Lindsey Crippen, Scott Modine** and **Cameron Modine**, plus four great-grandchildren. She also is survived by a sister, **Becky Teague Eaves**.

The family requests donations to Treasure Coast Hospice or the St. Lucie Historical Society.

## Robert A. Davis

Former St. Lucie County Tax Collector and

longtime historical society member **Robert Alan “Bob” Davis** died Sept. 9 at his White City home. He was 79.

He was born Dec. 24, 1944, in Biloxi, Miss. To **Claude** and **Lillian Davis**. Both his parents, plus sister **Claudia** all were active in the St. Lucie Historical Society.

He was a graduate of Dan McCarty High School and Indian River Junior College. He served as a U.S. Army officer in Vietnam, then earned a bachelor’s degree from Florida Atlantic University. He had a career as a certified public accountant, in private practice and in public service. He was elected to three 4-year terms as tax collector and retired in 2012.

Among the leaders of the Fort Pierce Exchange Club, he helped to raise hundreds of thousands of dollars for prevention of child abuse with the popular Chili Cook-Off events. He also served on the SLHS board of directors and was a supporter of Main Street Fort Pierce.

Survivors include his wife **Roberta**, a daughter **Joanne Davis Blandford** and a son, **Stephen Davis**. Also surviving are grandchildren **Adam, Connor** and **Finley Blandford**, plus two brothers, **Eddie Davis** and **Jeff Davis**.

The family requests donations to Treasure Coast Hospice, Main Street Fort Pierce or the historical society. Δ

---

## Feedback

---

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

**The Turner Family**, Nettles Island: “Such a great experience!”

**Nieves Family**, Port St. Lucie: “Thank you! Great place to learn about Florida.”

**Kevin & Elaina Murphy**, Fort Pierce: “Wonderful staff and exhibits. Will be back!”

**Ray, Karla, Raymond & Rayleigh Respress**, Avon Park: “So big - really nicely done! I love the last room with “everything else.”

**Judy King**, At sea on catamaran (from Canada): “Lovely, thanks.”

**Pete & Teresa Milanese, Frank & Anthony Colletti**, Port St. Lucie: “Great museum. Scavenger hunt is a fantastic idea - Thank you.”

**Carlton Ray & Grandson Yagul**, Oaxaca, Mexico: “Thank you!”

**Dan Sadler & Steve Litcha**, Elizabethtown, PA: “Great museum - very welcoming staff. Not to be missed!”

**Timo & Awnika**, Germany: Very interesting. Danke!”

**Jose & Alyson Monzon**, Port St. Lucie: Very beautiful and interesting. Enjoyed it very much.”

**Eli & Claire Heary**, France (near Paris): “Very interesting! We like it a lot. Thank you!”

**Don & Karen Baker**, Grand Rapids, MI: “Excellent local history.” Δ

*TURPENTINE ... continued from page 3*

Senator Knabb was forced to sell his camps a decade later following a federal investigation. Thus came a close to one of Florida's uglier chapters in our history in the abuses by law enforcement towards African Americans and poor whites who were victims of petty crime charges. The venerable turpentine industry was starting to fade with advances in chemistry and passed like the wind through the ancient pines.

The end of the turpentine era started in the mid-1950's. Steel-hull ships replaced the old wooden-hull ships. Synthetic chemicals began to be used for many of the products previously used from turpentine. The pines were being harvested for timber and pulp wood in the vast forestry stands. The tree trunks were used but the stumps were left behind. The stumps were the last source of turpentine and were removed from the ground using dynamite. After being blown out of the ground, they were transported to facilities that used a steam treatment process to extract the oil.

The forestry industries gravitated to the Slash pines because of their faster growth rate for pulp wood. Turpentine was also gained as a byproduct from the pulp paper process.

Years ago, Holopaw was a large turpentine town. Holopaw was a Creek Indian word for "walkway" or "pavement." This was probably because it was a stop for the Florida East Coast railroad that the timber

industry used for sending out the local timber and turpentine resources. It was a secondary leg of the railway system and recorded record numbers in timber and produce.

**J.M. Griffin** started a sawmill and turpentine business that was a "company" town. He hired over 500 employees and had one of the first all-electric sawmills in the county but closed during the Depression of the 1930's.

In 1935, the Peavy-Wilson lumber company opened and employed more than 1,000 timber, turpentine and sawmill workers. The town's population had grown to a little over 2,000 workers. The railroad ceased operations in 1947 when Fort Pierce and Port Mayaca became the preferred rails for goods. The lumber company used its many steam locomotives to keep carrying their bounty north until the company closed in 1951, at which time the tracks were removed. The residents were forced to leave and look for jobs elsewhere and the postal service was discontinued in 1954 leaving the land to ranchers and old timers. You can imagine them rocking on their porches reminiscing about the good ol' days and the not-so-good of the past.

The turpentine days have faded like so many of the boom time industry but the northern Florida town of Perry still boasts on its highway signs that it is the "Pine Tree Capital of the World." Δ

## Dozens of forts dotted Florida during warfare with Seminoles

A modern map of Florida (for example, one produced by the AAA auto club) shows eleven cities and towns labeled with the name "Fort." The names are artifacts from a bygone era, reminders of the Second Seminole War (1835-42). Such names as Fort Pierce, Fort Lauderdale and Fort Myers are quite familiar. Others such as Fort Ogden, Fort McCoy and Fort White are less well known.

A wartime map produced by the U.S. Army is displayed in the St. Lucie County Regional History Center and contains more than three dozen "fort" references, marking military installations. Why so many? The answer is that the conflict moved around a lot.

When hostilities began late in 1835, early fighting took place mostly in north-central Florida, around Ocala and westward toward the Withlacoochee River.

Gradually the fighting spread elsewhere as soldiers pursued elusive bands of Seminoles. By 1842 dozens of forts dotted the entire length of the peninsula.

The U.S. Army, reinforced by Navy and Marine Corps troops, built primitive forts for their own protection. They were nothing fancy, sometimes little more than a blockhouse made of logs with a stockade fence. From there soldiers would go on patrol, raiding Seminole villages, destroying crops, and capturing as many as possible for transport to the "Indian Territory" west of the Mississippi River. Many forts merely became temporary supply depots where troops could replenish their rations and equipment. These places were abandoned as troops moved farther afield.

After the war, as more settlers moved into Florida, villages grew around some of these old fort sites. A few, such as Fort Pierce, are thriving cities now. Δ

St. Lucie Historical Society, Inc.  
P O Box 578  
Fort Pierce, Florida 34954

NON-PROFIT ORG.  
US POSTAGE  
**PAID**  
Fort Pierce, Fl  
Permit No 422

Or Current Resident

**Membership Application**

**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 5<sup>th</sup> Street**

**Fort Pierce, Florida 34950**

Society General Meetings are held on the 3<sup>rd</sup> Thursday of the month, from September through May. A meal is provided before the meeting at the price of \$14.00 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.