



DeSoto County Historical Society

PAST • PRESENT • FUTURE
ARCADIA, FLORIDA

DeSoto County Historical Society News

P.O. Box 1824 • Arcadia FL 34265 • 863-266-5774

www.historicdesoto.org

November 2022

This issue sponsored by - **Betty Hall Wood** in memory of her late husband, **G. Pierce Wood, Jr.**



Since July 2021, Team Arcadia volunteers had transformed the former upstairs antique mall into a community space for arts and entertainment. However, the Opera House is no longer a project of the not-for-profit organization.

—Photo courtesy Arcadia Main Street Facebook

Two Historic Structures Condemned After Hurricane Damage

by Carol Mahler

At the Oct. 18 City Council meeting, Code Enforcement Officer Carl McQuay announced that two historic structures sacked by Hurricane Ian— Heard Opera House, 106 W. Oak St., and the Verandah House, 305 W. Oak St., are now condemned, or “unfit for human habitation.” They may be repaired or demolished, but are closed to the public.

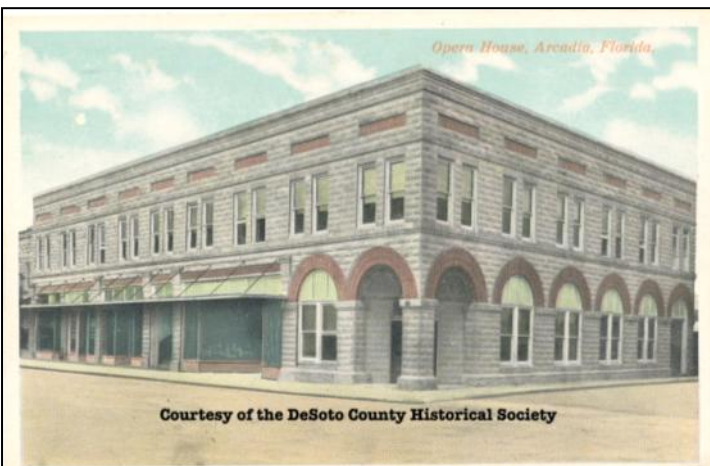
The Heard Opera House

In Oct. 1905, John J. Heard purchased a residence at 106 W. Oak St., and it burned to the ground in the Thanksgiving Day, Nov. 30, 1905, fire that destroyed downtown Arcadia. Heard rebuilt a commercial structure with stores on the first floor and upstairs offices that faced Oak St. and Polk Ave., with an auditorium in the northwest corner. Specifically to help entrepreneurs rebuild downtown Arcadia, Heard established the South Florida Loan and Trust Company.

According to an article by Gene Prevatt published in the Nov. 28, 1985,

DeSoto County Times, Architect Francis J. Kennard (1844-1965) designed the Opera House in the French Renaissance Revival style.

Continued next page—



Courtesy of the DeSoto County Historical Society

November Meeting:



Pine Level United Methodist Church,

9596 N.W. Pine Level St., will host the Historical Society's meeting on **Thurs., Nov. 10.** PLEASE MARK YOUR CALENDARS. Lunch will be a covered dish meal at 11:30 a.m., with a short business meeting at noon, followed by a slide presentation of the history of the church and a tour of their new archives room. Connie Bateman is inviting members of her congregation to join us.



At noon, President Norma Banas will conduct a short business meeting including election of the proposed slate of Society officers and directors for 2023. Installation of officers/directors will be at our December meeting.

Continued—**Two Historic Structures Condemned After Hurricane Damage**

As reported by Salley Davenport in the Nov. 23, 1969, *Sarasota Herald Tribune*, the 50' x 60' auditorium in the Opera House has a 24' stage and 300 seats, in groups of six “easily removed to provide floor space for the dances that were frequently held . . . It was known to have the best acoustics in town . . .”

Since July 2021, Team Arcadia volunteers had transformed the former upstairs antique mall into a community space for arts and entertainment. While they cleaned, painted, and repaired, classes in music, dance, and drama were taught, and shows were staged.

However, the Opera House is no longer a project of the not-for-profit organization. Danny Mastrodonato told the City Council that he and Krissy Constantino now manage the building for Jean Vavrosky, the owner, and that work had been done to shore up the roof as the hurricane had blown out the west wall behind the stage and two windows on the north side. As of Monday, Oct. 20, Code Enforcement Officer Carl McQuay said that the building is closed to the public.



Right—The storm wrecked the Opera House’s west wall behind the stage of the auditorium.

Below—Hurricane Ian blew out two auditorium windows—damaged by Hurricane Irma in 2017—on the north wall of the Heard Opera House. —Photographs courtesy of Carol Mahler.



More Hurricane Ian stories and photos next page and pg. 8

The Poinsettia Apartments

After the congregation built a new masonry sanctuary at 304 W. Oak St. in 1921, Michael Schlossberg purchased the old wood-frame Trinity Methodist Church. He planned to relocate and remodel the old chapel into apartments. However, the church mysteriously burned as reported in the June 3, 1921, “Arcadian.” Schlossberg then built the Poinsettia Apartments—now known as the Veranda House—on two of three lots he had purchased from Dr. Robert L. Cline. Schlossberg built his home on the third lot, 313 W. Oak St.

The Poinsettia Apts. is a unique commercial structure because it employs bungalow-style characteristics: low-pitched roof—supported by thick piers on the first-floor porch, exposed curving rafters under the eaves, and many doors and windows opening onto the north and south upper and lower verandahs.

Below—Already in disrepair, the Verandah House was ravaged by Hurricane Ian and is now condemned. Photograph courtesy of Carol Mahler.

Bottom—Originally called the Poinsettia Apts., the Veranda House was built by Michael Schlossberg in 1921 to provide housing in the rapidly growing city. Photograph courtesy of the DeSoto County Historical Society.



Hurricane Ian Slams Arcadia

Thanks to Stuart Swanberg and Cindy McLeod Ely for supervising Scott Swanberg and Eric Swanberg as they installed the hurricane shutters on the Museum on Oct. 27. The next day, Hurricane Ian made landfall as a Category 4 storm at Cayo Costa island in Charlotte Harbor. It plowed through DeSoto County as a slow-moving Category 3 storm with incredible rainfall that inundated the State.

The Peace River reached the historic height of nearly 24 feet, and the flood drowned and damaged roads and bridges. Near the Museum, Jordan Branch surged out its banks, and flooded several historic homes on Monroe Ave. The winds ripped branches from the oak trees and toppled two dead cabbage palm trees at the Museum and Library property, but the structures remained intact. After the storm, both Stuart and Cindy surveyed the property and reported the good news.

Thanks to Scott Swanberg and Eric Swanberg for taking down the shutters and to Carol Mahler for cleaning the tree debris from the porches and doorways.

Thanks to Carol Mahler, Karen Smoke, and Lou Towne of the Society and to Brooks Armstrong, Nancy Armstrong, Kevin Erickson, Regina Renner, and Ayla Buchika, members of People for Protecting Peace River (3PR) who worked several hours on Oct. 13 to chainsaw branches and trunks, rake debris, and drag everything to the curb, where it was hauled away the next day! Thanks to Carol for raking up the leavings and fetching some forgotten logs.

Karen,
Regina,
Kevin,
Ayla



3PR members:
Kevin Erickson,
Regina Renner,
Ayla Buchika,
Nancy Armstrong,
Brooks Armstrong.

—Photos by
Carol Mahler

Message from the President

Arcadia is the place to live. We had our share of problems from total loss to minor damage from Hurricane Ian yet everyone remained positive, cheerful, and helpful to each other.

I am especially grateful for the support from our members and hopefully will get back home soon. In the meantime, I and your board of directors have continued to conduct Society business including plans for our monthly meetings, for Tour of Homes, and for Pioneer Day. I will not reiterate plans—see details elsewhere in this newsletter.

Just know you are all in our hearts and thoughts and we hope to see everyone in the coming months maybe at a meeting, maybe at a function, or just drop by the Seed House and say hello.

Norma

Historical Society Newsletter Sponsors

Jan. - **Alvie Davidson** in memory of his parents, **Ollie & Mary Lee Davidson**

Feb. - **J.R. Griffis & Jeff Griffis** in memory of their beloved, **Nancy Webster**

March - **Dale, Patty & Sue** in loving memory of our parents, **Howard & Velma Melton**

April - **Warren & Arlene Conley** in memory of **Hazel & Leo Williams**

May - **Marshall and Hazel Whidden** in memory of our parents, **Marshall and Barbara Whidden**, and our beloved son **Douglas Marshall Whidden**

June - **Michelle, Dan, & Dow** in loving memory of our parents, **Eddie & Iris Garner**

July - **Ruth Dunn** in loving memory of her late husband, **Rudolph Dunn**.

Aug. - **Charlotte Hill Carter** in loving memory of her husband, **Frederick Lawrence Carter**

Sept. - **Marguerite & Tom Hankins** in memory of **Mr. & Mrs. T.J. Pipkin** (**Pip & Alison Pickard Pipkin**)

Oct. - **People for Protecting Peace River**

Nov. - **Betty Hall Wood** in memory of her late husband, **G. Pierce Wood, Jr.**

Dec. - **The McLeod children** in memory of their Dad, **Harold McLeod**

**In Memory of
John Arvine Reynolds
(1937-2022)**

Born in Arcadia General Hospital, John moved with his family to their Wood St. homestead before he attended Nocatee Elementary School, built in 1915, where his mother—Ruby Helen Gault Reynolds (1897-1991)—taught.



Also a teacher and later a bookkeeper for the Seaboard Airline Railway, his father—Sam Quinn Reynolds (1891-1963)—served as lay preacher at Nocatee Methodist Church. John’s grandparents—John Angus Reynolds (1860-1934) and Mary Catherine Mullins

Reynolds (1867-1955)—helped found that church in 1890.

After graduating from DeSoto High, John earned his AA from Manatee Junior College, BA in interdisciplinary natural sciences and MA in adult education from USF. Dr. Clayton E. Ray, Florida State Museum’s Curator of Vertebrate Paleontology (now Florida Museum of Natural History) viewed John’s fossil collections. When Ray worked at the Smithsonian, he hired John to serve as paleontologist on projects in Mexico and Saltville, Virginia. The fossil sand dollars (“Melita alcinensis”) John discovered in Acline, Florida, are the Smithsonian’s “type and paratype” specimens.

A certified Florida Master Naturalist, John grew native plants in his nursery and was an expert on how pioneers used them. His phenomenal knowledge of natural history made him a gifted teacher and natural history presenter. He taught in the county schools and wrote the grant that established the Environmental Learning Lab (ELL) aka the “Outdoor Classroom.” He also assisted other counties in founding ELLs.

In 1975, he convinced Louie Morgan to donate Morgan Park to the County. In 2001, he met his wife, Forest Dunbar, who assisted Dr. Gary Parker and his wife Mary in establishing the Creation Adventure Museum. A longtime member of the DeSoto County Historical Society, he served as president from 1996 to 2006, and in 2001, accepted the donation of the John Morgan Ingraham House from Marguerite and Tom Hankins.

He is survived by his wife of 21 years. He was preceded in death by his siblings, Samuel Quinn Reynolds, Jr. (1929-2012), and June Elise Reynolds Fulton (1932-2021). A graveside service was held at 11 a.m. on Thurs. Oct. 27, at Joshua Creek Cemetery.

**Glimpse from the Past
November 1906 Election**

Serving as Florida’s 19th governor from 1905 to 1909, Napoleon Bonaparte Broward (1857-1910) tried to drain The Everglades by forming a massive drainage district to raise funds as detailed in the “drainage amendment” to the State’s constitution. The results of the election were reported in the Nov. 8, 1906, The Champion (<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn95047227/1906-11-08/ed-1/seq-1/>).

“Election Returns: Indicate The Defeat of Drainage Amendment. The election passed off quietly in Arcadia, and so far as we have heard, in DeSoto County and the State. The anti-drainage [news]papers claim that the governor’s amendment was defeated, but by just how much still remains in doubt. Lee and Escambia counties gave large majorities for drainage and in some other counties the contest was so close that only the official vote will decide the case. DeSoto went with the crowd, against drainage, and the amendment for raising the salaries of the judges was also defeated.”



Courtesy of the State Archives of Florida (<https://www.floridamemory.com/items/show/128342>)



Lots of hands-on help is needed for Pioneer Day! Contact Carol Mahler, 863-445-0789, desotocountyhistoricalsociety@gmail.com. Text or leave a message on the Society phone: 863-266-5774.

Save the date!
DeSoto County Historical Society's 19th Annual
Pioneer Day
March 25, 2023
with the Arcadia American Legion
sponsored Antique Tractor, Vintage Car,
and Hit & Miss Engine Show
Turner Agri-Civic Center, 2250 NE Roan St.
P.O. Box 1824, Arcadia, FL 34268 • 863-266-5776
desotocountyhistoricalsociety@gmail.com
www.historicdesoto.org • Like us on Facebook!

Minutes of the Oct. 13 Regular Member Meeting

by Carol Mahler

In the absence of President Norma Banas, Vice-president Vernon Keen opened the meeting at Joshua Citrus Grove Stand with a prayer and the Pledge of Allegiance. Everyone ate their food, and then Carol Mahler, as a member of the nominating committee announced the slate of officers and directors and invited nominations from the floor. None were made.

She announced that the JROTC students had asked to cancel or postpone the scheduled outside work day with the Society, so they could help clean up the Boy Scout Camp in Fort Myers where they have camped. All agreed. Then she introduced Lynn Shelfer who gave a presentation about the history of the Shelfer family and the Joshua Creek business.

The earliest ancestor she found was Johann Tobias Shelfer, on a ship's manifest that sailed in 1709 to New Bern, North Carolina. German and Swedish immigrants had established New Bern as a Protestant town in 1710 to escape persecution. The settlement ultimately failed.

At some point, the surname changed from Shilfer to Shelfer about 11 generations ago. James Shelfer, her husband Kevin's great-great grandfather, moved from North Carolina to Georgia to Alabama. He married a woman from Alabama in a police station in Okolona, Mississippi. In 1880, they moved to Texas probably to take advantage of the public land sales. He established a farm with some cattle.

In 1887, James purchased this property in DeSoto County, and although Hurricane Ian blew down the sign, the farm is an official Florida Century Pioneer Family Farm. James and his wife Melissa had four children—the eldest was 13 years old and the youngest was a baby when they came to DeSoto County. He died in 1901 after his horse bucked him off and he fell in the creek. Melissa was pregnant, and they both felt it would be a boy, so they decided on the name "Jimmy." Jimmy was born a girl and she grew up and married A. P. Hollingsworth, so Tom and Rodney are related to the Shelfers.

One of the other sons, named Dan was Kevin's great grandfather, and he planted citrus. His son was Arthur, and Author's son was Dan, who was the father of Kevin Shelfer. In 1988, he and Lynn married, and in 1989, they started Joshua Citrus as a retail business on Highway 17. First it suffered a fire and then in 2004, Hurricane Charley snatched off the roof. So they built a packing house at the barn in the old family grove and homestead with a bin of fruit for visitors. Now, they don't sell any wholesale fruit, and they love having folks visit the grove stand.

They grow a variety of fruit: navel, temple, blood, and Valencia oranges; Honeybell and Murcott tangerines, tangelos, white and pink grapefruit, pomelos, plus Meyer lemons.

Lynn introduced her new grandson, a 7th generation Floridian—Bryant Coker. She explained their choice of business name—Joshua—meaning "the Lord's salvation" as well as for the creek. Carol read a brief history—as researched by Kathy Bryce—that said the creek was originally called Josh's Creek for Josh Riggs who lost his saddlebag in the waters.

After the presentation, everyone enjoyed free soft-serve ice cream.

Thank You Joshua Citrus!

Visit the Grove Stand, open M-F 10 a.m. - 5 p.m., Sat 10 a.m. - 4 p.m., closed Sunday. 863-494-6166



How Joshua Creek Was Named

by Carol Mahler and Kathy Bryce

Born in Georgia in 1835, Joshua D. E. Riggs moved with his parents to Florida before 1850, and in 1853, married Susan Alderman (1839-1887) in Hillsborough County. In 1856, he served in the Florida Mounted Volunteers during the Third Seminole War (1855-1858). He also served in Company B of the 7th Infantry of the Confederate States of America Army during the U.S. Civil War (1861-1865). They moved to Fort Green (now in Hardee County) sometime before the 1880 U.S. Census, where he is listed as a farmer.

Susan is buried in the Alderman-Pelote Cemetery in Lithia (Hillsborough County). He died in 1895 and is buried in New Zion Cemetery in Ona, Florida.

An article on p. 42 of the Sept. 11, 1938, *Tampa Tribune* includes the following: "The Parkers and Whiddens made their homes on Josh's Creek or Joshua Creek, so named when Josh Riggs lost his saddle bag in the stream. Joshua Creek post office was later moved to Arcadia."

Evelyn Mahon Sasser, longtime Society member, remembered that her parents—McSwain and Minnie Mahon—and other relatives always referred to the branch as Josh's Creek.



“Rose Wilson” Portrayal by:

Kathryn Chesley, Sarasota County History Impersonator

When: November 15, 2022

7:00 PM - 8:30 PM

Location: Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Venice,
1971 Pinebrook Rd Venice, FL 34292

Seating is limited. Please plan to arrive early.

See flyer at right—

For more information on programs & events see:
<https://veniceareahistoricalociety.org/Calendar>

John Morgan Ingraham House Museum
300 N Monroe Avenue

MUSEUM OPEN:

9 a.m. to 1 p.m. on Thursdays (except for the second
Thurs. of the month),

9 a.m. to 1 p.m. on the second and fourth Saturday of
the month.



**The Howard and Velma Melton Historical Research
Library in the Ingraham Seed House**
120 W Whidden Street

Open by appointment only:

Research assistance available. 863-266-5774

Contact Information

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President: Norma Banas, 863-558-6115 sanctuaryofarcadia@gmail.com

Betty Intagliata

LECTURE SERIES
2022-2023

“HISTORICAL PERSONALITIES
OF SARASOTA COUNTY”

All programs begin at 7 pm

Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Venice
1971 Pinebrook Rd., Venice, FL 34292



The Betty Intagliata Lecture Series is sponsored
by the Venice Area Historical Society, with
permanent funding provided by the Bill Jervey,
Jr. Charitable Foundation. All programs
are FREE and OPEN to the public.



November 15, 2022

“Rose Wilson”

Portrayal by: Kathryn Chesley
Sarasota County History Impersonator

January 17, 2023

“Dr. Furman Whitaker”

Presenter: Josh Goodman
Manager, Sarasota County
Division of Historical
Resources



February 21, 2023

“Leonard Reid”

Presenter:
Representative of the African-
American Arts, Cultural &
History Center, Sarasota

Annual dues in the DeSoto County Historical Society are
due January 1. Payment may be made online, by mail, or in
person at one of our gatherings.

Thank you for your support!

DeSoto County's Historic Cemeteries – Part 2 by Carol Mahler

Continued from last month, a review of our historic cemeteries.

The King Family Cemetery is at the center of the Ziba King Memorial Recreational Park, 6895 S.W. Georgia St., in Fort Ogden. Named for Ziba King (1838-1901)—a cattle baron, banker, and legislator—the park is family land donated to the county in 1955 by his descendants: Hazel King Fish and Zoe King Lykes.

Built in 1961, Mount Olive Baptist Church, 2788 S.W. Terrell St., also has a cemetery. The earliest burial may be Jacob Berrien who died in 1957.

Oak Hill Cemetery is also known as the Bunker Cemetery. The Bunker community was named for George H. Bunker (1879-1939), who surveyed the southern part of the present DeSoto County in 1885. Oak Hill Cemetery St. bisects the cemetery that is surrounded by orange groves. Tradition says that Pioneer Elizabeth “Betsy” Bertie Jackson Bates (1834-1914) brought the first orange seeds to DeSoto County, and she and her husband, John Maston “Peg Leg” Bates, veteran of the Third Seminole War (1832-1918), are buried there. The earliest burial may be John Lewis Walker who died in 1888, and Walker Branch, a tributary of Peace River, is probably the namesake of his family.

The City of Arcadia owns Oak Ridge Cemetery at the end of Lee Avenue, and it originally had a separate section for African-Americans. The seven children of James and Annie Mae Richardson—who were poisoned and died in 1967—are buried there.

One of the most renowned burials is Chesterfield Smith (1917-2003) who served as president of the American Bar Association from 1973 to 1974. When President Richard Nixon ordered that Archibald Cox, Watergate special prosecutor, be fired, Smith issued a statement from the ABA that said, “No man is above the law.” He also advocated that the investigation of Nixon be completed by an independent special prosecutor.

The Union Jack flies over a portion of Oak Ridge Cemetery where 23 Royal Air Force cadets are buried. While they were training at Carlstrom and Dorr Fields during World War II, they died of disease, in car accidents, and a few during advanced training at Clewiston. At 10 a.m. every Memorial Day, the Arcadia Rotary Club commemorates them with a public ceremony that always draws some kinfolk from the United Kingdom.

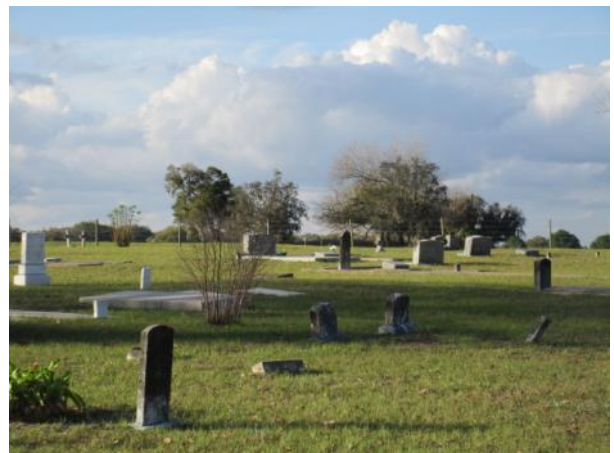
Namesake of Owen H. Dishong (1850-1902), the first sheriff of DeSoto County, Owens consisted of a citrus packing house, general store, post office, school and railroad (nicknamed the “Gallberry Central” according to Ed Johnson), and Mt. Ephraim Baptist Church, organized in 1884. Its adjacent historic cemetery is also known as the Owens Cemetery. The oldest burial may be “Our Babe,” the two-year-old son of James Newton Hollingsworth and Martha Hollingsworth, buried in Oct. 1886.

A historic marker identifies Pine Level United Methodist Church, 9596 N.W. Pine Level St., established in 1868. The town of Pine Level was founded in 1866 as the county seat of Manatee (established in 1855) and then DeSoto (formed in 1887). A Florida Historic Marker identifies the location of the original town and courthouse. A monument at the base of the marker commemorates the listing in 2014 of the 40-acre townsite in the National Register of Historic Places.

Two historic cemeteries are located in the Pine Level area: the Pine Level Campground Cemetery and the Keen Family Cemetery. About ten miles west of Arcadia, a historic marker for the Campground Cemetery is located at the entrance on State Road 70. Captain James D. Green (1823-1866), who served in Company B, 2nd Florida U.S. Calvary, may be the most prominent Union soldier buried in DeSoto County. Fort Green in present day Hardee County is his namesake.

The tombstone of John Platt (1793-1874) is often pointed out for its inscription: “Behold Dear Children as you pass by / as you are now, so once was I. As I am now / you soon must be / Prepare for death and follow me.”

The Keen Family Cemetery, also known as Indian Mound Cemetery, dates from the late nineteenth century. The earliest burial may be Daniel Whidden (1874-1898). A monument tells the story: “Daniel Whidden and Martha Keen Whidden [in] 1885 settled this section in old log home at [the intersection of today’s State Road] 70 and Horse Creek with cattle and citrus. Citrus froze in 1895. Dan and Martha died of yellow fever at age 27, left seven kids under age 9 in new two-story house. Big Dan sat tall in the saddle and barefoot in the stirrups.”



Indian Mound Cemetery (Keen) —Photos by Carol Mahler

Thank you Society and 3PR volunteers!



Clockwise from upper left—
Brooks
Armstrong,
Regina Renner,
Nancy
Armstrong,
Kevin Erickson,
Lou Towne,
Karen Smoke.

—Photos by
Carol Mahler

On September 28, 2022, Hurricane Ian plowed through DeSoto County as a slow-moving Category 3 storm with incredible rainfall that inundated the State.



The Peace River reached the historic height of nearly 24 feet, and the flood drowned and damaged roads and bridges.

Left—SR 70 looking west, FDOT maintenance yard in foreground.

Right, top—Intersection of CR 661 and SR 70 looking east, Peace River Campground at center.

Right, below—Interstate 75 inundated by Myakka River.

—Photos courtesy DeSoto County Sheriffs Office Facebook page

