

A History of African American Residents in Palm Coast

by Art Dycke, *City Historian*

As the African American Culture Society celebrated its 20th anniversary in October 2011, it is fitting that we begin to chronicle and record the names of the people and events that represent a history of African American residents in Palm Coast.

This author had the privilege of hosting a Palm Coast Historical Society meeting on October 12, 2004 organized by African American community leaders Erma and Robert Brooks and the late City Councilman Ralph Carter. Approximately 65 residents came together that evening with contagious enthusiasm to share their knowledge and memories of the earliest African American residents of Palm Coast. Participants at that meeting later contacted us with additional names of others who shared their pictures, news clippings, and stories. It is from this data that this article was written.

I apologize in advance for errors and inadvertently leaving out other early residents that I missed. Please consider this a start and not a finished project and help me correct errors and contribute new names and information to make this history more accurate and more complete.

Pioneer spirit is a basic theme that runs throughout the course of the Palm Coast community's history. Before 1969, land that would eventually become the city of Palm Coast was considered by some as nothing more than a "big pine-covered swamp." But when the corporate eyes of ITT/Levitt and Sons looked upon the virtually uninhabited land, they saw 22,000 acres of golf courses, marinas, oceanfront hotels, scenic drives, and house lots awaiting the arrival of sun-seeking "pioneers." Marketing strategies targeting urban residents in the North and Midwest offered slices of land cut out of miles of forest, and soon a 500-mile infrastructure of roads, utilities, and sewer lines bound Palm Coast to a future that included becoming the largest planned unit development in Florida history.

Most of the "pioneers" came from organized communities in northern states, leaving comfortable homes, family, and friends to enter a new environmentally and culturally different region. At first, none of the basic community amenities and services they were used to even existed. There were few neighbors and no stores or other amenities. They either had to drive 13 miles, partly over rutted dirt roads, to get basics such as milk or hope that the ITT-provided "stagecoach" would arrive and bring the necessities they had requested. However, cooperation among the early settlers and their pioneer spirit helped the developer to tame this desolate land and build a prosperous and thriving community.

As pioneers of the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, African Americans moving to a southern location must have felt some additional trepidation about their move. Flagler County was the last in Florida to accept Supreme Court orders for school integration and the school board still faced a federal court case that charged "internal segregation" in 1971. The first residents arrived in Palm Coast in 1972 and thereafter there was a report that a private developer was practicing discrimination in housing sales. ITT acted quickly to assure the community that this would not happen again. Most early African American residents that I interviewed indicated they had encountered relatively little cultural friction within the community itself as they blended with a variety of racial, ethnic, and religious groups that made up the early pioneer Palm Coast community.

Now I will attempt to name some of the earliest African American Palm Coast residents in chronological order up to the year 1985. I am using comments from interviews and newspaper clippings over the years as my sources. Lest we forget these early pioneer residents, please correct my errors

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and help me to fill in the blanks.

The first African American-heritage residents to move into Palm Coast that I know of were Peter and Cynthia Abbott in 1974. They met and married in Jamaica and moved to New York where he was an electrician and she, a bookkeeper. They were among many who responded to media ads urging them to attend a hometown presentation about a new planned development in Florida called Palm Coast. Also like many others, they signed up for a package to fly to Florida, stay at the newly-constructed Sheraton Palm Coast Inn by the ocean, be taken by boat to the Welcome Center with its 64 foot-high observation tower, and then to buy a plat- ted lot on a road that did not exist at the time.

Cynthia and Peter moved to 28 Fairview Lane in 1974. At that time ITT's Palm Coast consisted of the Welcome/Model Center, Palm Coast Golf Club, the original Palm Coast Yacht Club, the Sheraton by the ocean, a Handy Way convenience center/post office and approximately 150 other homes. Peter noted that there was one stop light and one blinking light in all of Flagler County and none in Palm Coast. Yet, Cynthia said, "We had so much fun here and everything was free! (She was referring to the fact that ITT had weekly buffets and entertainment for prospective home buyers that were open to all in the existing community.)"

Cynthia and Peter became citizens of the U.S. in 1976, our bicentennial year. That same year Cyn-



Cynthia and Peter holding their wedding picture on their 50th anniversary

thia established her own dress shop. Peter worked for ITT at the Palm Coast Utility Corporation and continued there until his retirement in 1998. Some of his fondest memories of those early days involve the fabulous fishing in the Intracoastal Waterway and canals of Palm Coast. Peter described catching "bushels full" of a wide variety of fish,



Early Palm Coast – "Fish by the bushel full"

including "croakers," any time he set his mind to it. He remembers that two huge fish kills took place sometime in the late '70s and early '80s as a result of prolonged freezes that ended the really good fishing.

Peter briefly considered leaving Palm Coast after his retirement but Cynthia would not hear of it. She says, "Then and now I love the people here and I wouldn't leave for anything."

I have been told that Roland Brown, a Tuskegee Airman and his wife Mary were very early residents, but I do not know the time of their arrival in Palm Coast.

Georgette Seabrook Powell and her late husband Dr. George W. Powell, a retired podiatrist, were among the first African American settlers in Palm Coast. They built their home in 1976 and immediately became actively involved in the community. George and Georgette had previous experience organizing community



Georgette Powell

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groups, both for social and political unification. Upon settling in Palm Coast, Dr. and Mrs. Powell, and three-four neighbors organized the African American Caribbean Heritage Organization (AA-CHO).

Lucille Ferguson retired to Palm Coast in 1976 at the tender age of 72. She celebrated her 100th birthday with a party at Ocean Hammock on October 2, 2004.



Lucille Ferguson and great great grandson David Green

Burt and Cynthia Hunt came to Palm Coast by way of Kingston, Jamaica; Queens in New York City; and Montclair, NJ. In 1977, Decca Marine became Palm Coast's first new industry, following purchase by the ITT Corporation, and Palm Coast became the Hunt's new home. Daughter Charlene grew up here and was a student at Flagler Palm Coast High School.



Burt and Cynthia Hunt

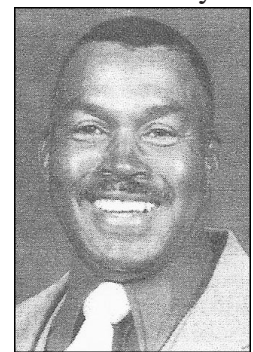
Cynthia worked as Supervisor of Special Collections for the ITT Community Development Corporation and Burt founded his own business after ITT left.

Burt is a past president of the Palm Coast International Club and a member of Kiwanis. He shares Cynthia's love of their heritage and both are members of AA-CHO.

When Dorothy and Gerald Gordon came from "up north" in 1977, they had to drive a dozen miles in order to shop and their entertainment consisted of looking at model houses and taking ITT boats across the ICW. "We never ever thought we would spend our retirement years in a southern state like Florida because of racial issues, etc. We have been here now for 27 years and our only disenchantment has been the last four hurricanes." (This statement was made in 2004.)

Joseph and Carol King were the first of three families that moved into the Woodlands section of Palm Coast in 1978. Joe retired from the Brooklyn, NY Sanitation Department and spent much time in volunteer activity in Palm Coast, especially during the disastrous 1985 fires. That year he was named "Citizen of the Year" by ITT in their "MOVERS AND SHAKERS" publication.

John and Pearl Owens built their home in 1975 but did not move to Palm Coast from Gaithersburg, MD until 1979. John entered the army in 1942 where he served in the 3403rd Quartermaster, Trucking Unit in this country and the European Theater of Operations. In Palm Coast John was one of the founders of AA-CHO; his wife Pearl was also an active participant and contributor to the bake sales which raised funds for the organization's scholarship fund. John chaired ITT's community-wide celebration of the completion of the toll bridge across the Intra-Coastal Waterway in 1988. A member of First Baptist Church, he has served on many missions with their disaster relief unit.



John Owens

James Mackey came to Palm Coast in 1980 and worked for the ITT Corporation. A former juvenile justice administrator in Chicago, IL, he lauded Palm Coast as "a place for refined middle-class black people." James was the first president of AA-CHO and he spent many years organizing sports tournaments and helping the youth of our community.

Before retiring and moving to Palm Coast in 1979, Andrew "Andy" White II was employed by the United States Postal Service for 30 years. He worked briefly in real estate in Palm Coast. In the early 1980s, he felt there was a need for more community fellowship. Together with others, he helped

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found the African-American Culture Heritage Organization. He served as president and treasurer of AACHO for several years.



Mother Rene Boyer-White, two-year-old Ruth Rene, father Andrew White III, with Ruth's grandparents Andrew and Letitia White

Rudolph (Rudy) Wheeler retired to Palm Coast in 1980 after a distinguished career as a teacher and athletic coach at Baltimore's Mergenthaler Vocational/Technical School with his wife Mary, who is also an educator. Kathleen Bishop reported the following segment of an introduction speech given by Rudy when he was 90 years old, "Rudy Wheeler remembers a time in Palm Coast when African Americans could not buy houses, a time when the Ku Klux Klan met in Bunnell, a time when hatred and bigotry could have gained a foothold in this new city. Speaking at the Black Heritage Festival, sponsored by the African American Caribbean Heritage Organization, Wheeler said ITT in the 1970's had spread the word of a new place to live in Florida, a great place for all people. Upon

arriving here, many found this was not the case. A developer had purchased property and refused to sell to black people. ITT, Wheeler said, stepped in, purchasing this property, promising there would be no ghettos in this new area, no separation of blacks and whites, a neighborhood for all."

Jim Allen first came to see Palm Coast in 1973 but did not permanently settle here until 1981. Strangely enough, Jim had heard about Palm Coast while he was at Fort Dix doing his military service. He had read about it in the *ARMY TIMES* and a local newspaper in New Jersey. He came down to visit and fell in love with the place. Canal lots were selling for approximately \$5000 to military personnel and the golf course was free. After completing his duty he lived for a while in Ocala before finally deciding to come on over to Palm Coast for good. Jim is a VFW member who has worked in the Flagler County transportation system. To this day, he takes people on very informative historical bus trips around Palm Coast and the historical sites in Flagler County.

Violet Gordon came to Palm Coast from Brooklyn, NY in 1981 and was amazed to find only one traffic light in the entire county. She is the historian for AACHO.

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(From left) Bill Blackwell, Jim Mackey, Pearl Owens, Teresa Morris, Doris Wheeler, Beryl Critchlow, Mary Brown, and Rudy Wheeler

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The African-American Caribbean Heritage Organization (AACHO) was formed in 1981 by Doris Wheeler, James Mackey, and Dr. George Powell. Gwen Howard, president of AACHO in 2009, listed the achievements of the organization as follows:

“Preserves the body of knowledge, accomplishments, contributions and cultural traditions of mainland and Caribbean blacks through cultural, educational and social programs; advances international, interracial, and interfaith understandings; provides scholarships for Flagler County students and leadership within the Flagler County community as ‘keepers of the culture;’ and supports local community projects and events.”



Rev. Frank Giddens (center), pastor of St. Paul's Baptist Church, accepts trophy from ICDC representative, Jim Gardner (right). At left is Andy White, AACHO president, with trophy donor, Jim Mackey, and meet director, Rudy Wheeler.

The group continues to host a Black Heritage Festival annually.



AACHO Officers Installed – Cynthia Hunt, president; Rudy Wheeler, vice president; Rupert Porter, treasurer; William Blackwell, financial secretary; Marjorie Brown recording secretary; Doris Wheeler, corresponding secretary; Mary Brown, historian; and Ursula Gordon, chaplain

The AACHO officer installation pictured above took place the end of December 1985. In my opinion that year ended the first, or “pioneer,” phase of Palm Coast’s historical development. It was the year in which Alan Smolen, ITT’s president of Palm Coast’s Community Development Corporation, retired and incoming president Jim Gardner took over. The time of building the physical amenities in Palm Coast and connecting them to the world with access to I-95 was over. The time for a second phase, one in which ITT community authority would phase out and local leadership of community affairs would phase in, was now in progress.

The ITT Corporation had a tradition of citing several community members each year for extraordinary activities that benefited the community. They were recorded and honored in a book of “Movers and Shakers” of the Palm Coast community. I hope I have properly presented many of the African American “movers and shakers” active in the

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pioneer phase of our community.

I've begun a list of individuals to be honored beginning in 1985 until this new city was incorporated (1999) and AACS built its home (2001). The following movers and shakers, with their activities, will be acknowledged more fully in future articles: Mildred O'Brian and other officers of AACHO, Dr. Morris Carter, Joyce Brown, Jacqueline Brown, Charlie Thorpe, Walter Morris, Augustus (Gus) Prince, Marion Bartley Hassell, Muriel and Eugene "Jeep" McCoy, Violet Hill Gordon, Frances Wills Thorpe, Shirley Chisholm, Theda Wilson, Jim Guines, Raleigh Stockton, and Ralph Carter.

Thereafter, we will research and acknowledge the founders of the African American Culture Society and Palm Coast NAACP. Other names, in-

cluding Vicki Taylor, Irma and Robert Brooks, Dan Parham, Vivian Richardson, Holsey Moorman, and William Lewis, will follow.

Please contact us regarding errors, omissions, and suggestions for future inclusions.

The Palm Coast Historical Society extends its very best wishes to the African American Culture Society for the success of their 20th anniversary celebration. We congratulate you for 20 years of accomplishment in your mission "to serve and educate the community through the preservation and interpretation of the rich culture and history of the African American and African Diaspora (ancestry) and their contributions to our nation and mankind." We hope this article will make a small contribution to your mission by highlighting African American achievements in Palm Coast history.

'Man, All We're Tryin' To Do Is Make the Music Swing!'

by JIM MISKELLY



Count Basie – News-Tribune February 8, 1984

PALM COAST—It was standing room only as they came from far and near to see and hear the legend, Count Basie, and his orchestra in Festival Tree Park Sunday afternoon sponsored by Flagler Palm Coast Kiwanis Club.

Whether you came just to listen to the music or to dance to the style of this great musician or to do both, you got your money's worth. An audience of nearly 1,000 applauded every number and kept wanting more. Toes were tapping and bodies were swaying in the familiar selections.

Count Basie was quoted as saying, "Man, all we were trying to do was

make the music swing," and swing it did. The only negative comments offered were that Basie could not be heard throughout the vast tent as he made cryptic musical comments and jokes about what the band was playing. The positive side of the program sent almost everyone away happy.

In just one section of the parking lot were seen license tags from Georgia, Massachusetts, Maryland, New York, Mississippi, New Jersey, Connecticut, Illinois, Michigan, Ontario, and New Hampshire, as well as Florida counties of Volusia, St. Johns, Duval, Nassau, Seminole, Indian River, Clay and, of course, Flagler..