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## Florida Frontiers Radio Transcripts

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### Florida Frontiers Radio Program #456

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## Transcript

### **Ben Brotemarkle**

Florida Frontiers, the weekly radio magazine of the Florida Historical Society, is made possible in part by the Department of State Division of Historical Resources and the State of Florida. It's also made possible by the Jessie Ball du Pont fund and by the historic Rossetter House Museum and Gardens in Eau Gallie, celebrating pioneer history, the natural environment, and women's history, available for weddings and events at [rossetterhousemuseum.org](http://rossetterhousemuseum.org).

This is Florida Frontiers, the weekly radio magazine of the Florida Historical Society, on the web at [myfloridahistory.org](http://myfloridahistory.org). I'm Ben Brotemarkle, and coming up on the program, minstrel shows were popular at the University of Florida in the 1910s.

### **Myles Sullivan**

For students interested in music, this is one of the main ways that they could do that, and it was described as practically the only student dramatic attempt at the University of Florida.

### **Ben Brotemarkle**

We'll discuss a lawsuit that challenged Jim Crow segregation in Florida.

### **Connie Lester**

Miss Brookins experience was one that was all too familiar to middle- and upper-class black travelers.

### **Ben Brotemarkle**

And we'll visit the historical black Stanton High School in Jacksonville. All that ahead on Florida Frontiers.

### **(Music Break)**

### **Ben Brotemarkle**

That's the Confederate anthem Dixie recorded in 1916 during America's Jim Crow era. The song was a staple of minstrel shows, where some members of all white casts would perform as stereotypical caricatures of black people. Myles Sullivan is a Ph.D. student in the Anthropology Department at the University of Florida in Gainesville. Sullivan wrote the article "Amateur Minstrel Shows and Black Face Amusements at the University of Florida in the Jim Crow Era", appearing in volume 99 of the Florida Historical Quarterly.

### **Myles Sullivan**

The topic of minstrelsy and blackface minstrelsy is very complicated, and there's been a lot of research done on it. But one of the things that stood out to me when I first came across these shows, which appear in, actually, they were recently digitized as of 2019, the student newspaper at University of Florida did a full digitization of the newspaper and just searching for topics for seminar class on Jim Crow, America, I stumbled across these shows in the 1910s. When I started looking more into the history of minstrelsy in America, you get a different picture of the antebellum minstrel shows with what's occurring at UF, one, because of that amateur nature of the shows, these are sort of local shows

that were spurred on by students and faculty at the UF put on for Gainesville. Those people in Gainesville, that's a way to display student talent and at the same time it was a fundraiser.

**Ben Brotemarkle**

While the heyday of minstrel shows was in the 1800s, Sullivan discovered that the popularity of amateur minstrel shows in Gainesville grew in the 1910s.

**Myles Sullivan**

At this point, a lot of professional minstrel shows were going bankrupt after their initial popularity in the 19th century. There are a few sorts of stragglers left in the 1910s, but a lot of sorts of research focuses on minstrelsy by the 1910s, you're looking at birth of a nation in cinema in these other sorts of new novel forms of entertainment that are coming out. But at the same time across America, there seems to be a lot of organizations and clubs and schools, churches were putting on amateur blackface minstrel shows. Why were these organizations, a lot of times, exclusively for white individuals? Why were they all putting on these sorts of racialized performances, where racial caricatures of African American, you know, music, song, dance, and even speech?

**Ben Brotemarkle**

Initially, the minstrel shows presented at the University of Florida were held to raise money to build bleacher seats for the new football stadium.

**Myles Sullivan**

So that's another sort of linkage, like the first seat at a stadium that they can seat 80,000 people was coming through this sort of racialized entertainment. Which is sort of strange to think about these kinds of linkages between this kind of entertainment as a way to fundraise that has started with these early practices of blackface. So looking through the sort of documents which includes the yearbooks, the primary sort of focus was the student newspaper, the Florida Alligator, and then also oral histories that were collected from students and some of these, were most of these were done by Samuel Proctor in the 1970s and 60s, and sort of getting at what people were saying, writing and talking about and how they remembered these shows to get an idea of one, what exactly was happening on these stages. And then so what were the impacts of local performances of these blackface caricatures in Gainesville and in Northern Florida?

**Ben Brotemarkle**

Sullivan says that the minstrel shows at the newly established University of Florida were a way for the school to connect with the local community.

**Myles Sullivan**

One thing to note is that this was really that sort of aspect of community engagement, because the University of Florida had recently arrived in Gainesville following the Buckman Act in 1906. And so, this is the first shows in 1914 were only eight years after that. And so, this was a sort of a way of engaging with the town. And there have been precedents, actually in Gainesville itself. East Florida Seminary had put on a minstrel show in the 1900s, as well as sort of a local society as a fundraiser as well.

### **Ben Brotemarkle**

Performing arts programs were not a high priority in the early days at the University of Florida, and Sullivan says that minstrel shows provided rare performance opportunities for students.

### **Myles Sullivan**

For students interested in music, this was one of the main ways that they could do that, and it was described as practically the only student dramatic attempt at the University of Florida. So, this is really a primary focus for people interested in theater and music and acting. This was pretty much about the only opportunity that they had, outside of forming their own dance bands and stuff like that, which actually happened. You know, people played in the minstrel shows and then would form bands and play jazz music for dances and stuff.

### **Ben Brotemarkle**

Sullivan found that the minstrel shows that the University of Florida sponsored were variety shows and not everyone was in blackface.

### **Myles Sullivan**

There were the end men who were in blackface, and actually two of these people were locals from Gainesville and one, Jay Fletcher Burnett was actually, you know, in 1920, he was the President of the Rotary Club. So these are well-known people in town and well respected socially. And again, this was an opportunity for students to meet locals and work with them and then put on the show. And then also when they were doing, they started doing tours across the state, so they went to Ocala, they went to Tampa, they went to Jacksonville, Orlando and in total there was between 1914 and 1920 there were 33 shows that were sort of under this name, The Greater Florida Minstrels of Students. The key thing here is that you know, not everybody was in blackface. And so that there were these serious sorts of ballad singers, they had, like, the gymnastics team, would do a performance. But interspersed with ballads where these end men who would insert jokes, sang sort of Blues songs and a style minstrelsy that was popular at that time under the name of Coon Songs, they would perform these songs and that's how they were described in the newspaper and sort of known characters that were often used for, you know, they were thieves that would steal chickens, and were lazy and have a razor that they could slash people with and be violent. And so, we're getting these two images of, you know, these comic scenes of black face and these more violent scenes interspersed between sort of maybe regular pop songs.

### **Ben Brotemarkle**

Sullivan's interest in folk music was what initially brought him to his study of minstrel shows. He says the casts were mostly performing the current popular songs of the day.

### **Myles Sullivan**

What you see is actually the playing songs that were published by Tin Can Alley publishers, not a year or two years earlier, these are new songs that are being performed and that's a selling point of the show. People don't want to see songs that are 50 or 60 years old, or maybe not even 10 years old. These are being built as up-to-date, snappy tunes. And these are songs that are popular nationwide. From some of the people that have looked at sort of aggregates of popular music at that time, a lot of these were high

selling in sheet music sales. But nonetheless, in terms of the racial imagery, one sort of scene stands out in 1920 from a show in Jacksonville, is they're still nonetheless built as old time, the old-time minstrel shows how it's described, and even in this 1920 show, for example, they're employing ideas of what Dixie is. And so, they start to show as in its described as a, you know, old time show a song that was called Dixie is Dixie Once more, that was celebrating the end of World War One, and the return of soldiers from World War One, it mentions the Suwannee shore, so the Suwannee River in Florida, but it's written by a person from New York. And it's sort of celebrating the work of student veterans who are coming back and painting them in context of the Old South, the antebellum South. That was sort of being put up in these nostalgic traditions at this time. And then at the end of the show, they also had do another recently released song called Who Discovered Dixie? That again is drawing on these sort of old South notions of the old plantation homes, and then they're putting on what they described as a plantation jubilee, where they actually draw on some of those older minstrel songs, in addition to this newer song as sort of the big finale. And so in this instance, right after World War One, at the time when there's increased agitation by Black Floridians for their civil rights, as we're seeing this sort of melding of the old South and the New South on stage in this really locally enacted performance, that is sort of mustered together by a local community and put on for a local community.

#### **Ben Brotemarkle**

In the first three decades of the 20th century, Florida had the highest per capita rate of lynching in the United States. Sullivan draws a connection between minstrel shows of the 1910s and racial violence as public spectacle.

#### **Myles Sullivan**

How that connects to the rest of the Jim Crow Florida at that time is this idea of humor and entertainment and the blackface, as it's locally enacted, is an object of entertainment and humor. And then we're also seeing that in much more explicitly violent actions like the lynchings in Florida, which were at an all-time high in the state. And this idea of spectacle lynchings, where this becomes a performance. And in a similar avenue that we're having these blackface entertainments on stage is that this performance element that's generated from a community level is also occurring in these sorts of popular acts of justice.

#### **Ben Brotemarkle**

Sullivan says that unfortunately, blackface is not a thing of the past.

#### **Myles Sullivan**

We're still seeing this today in terms of minstrel, blackface, and academic settings. Even at UF, there's cases up through the 60s and 70s, there were fraternities putting on benefit shows. And then yesterday, my roommate was telling me about a person in Oregon, protesting a vaccine mandate by showing up to school, dressed as Rosa Parks, in blackface. This is something that keeps getting sort of reiterated in society and sort of has in some ways sort of been positioned within academic settings, more so than popular culture in the theater in some ways, though, that's still prevalent as well.

#### **Ben Brotemarkle**

Miles Sullivan is a PhD student at USF. His article, "Amateur Minstrel Shows and Black Face Amusements at the University of Florida in the Jim Crow Era," appears in volume 99 of the Florida Historical Quarterly. He discussed his research at the 2021 Florida Historical Society Virtual Annual Meeting and Symposium, which is archived online at [myfloridahistory.org](http://myfloridahistory.org).

**(Music Break)**

**Ben Brotemarkle**

This is Florida Frontiers, the weekly radio magazine of the Florida Historical Society. I'm Ben Brotemarkle. Find us anytime online at [myfloridahistory.org](http://myfloridahistory.org), where you'll find lots of free content, including archives of this program and our public television series, Florida Frontiers. That's [myfloridahistory.org](http://myfloridahistory.org).

**(Music Break)**

**Ben Brotemarkle**

Joining us now is Connie Lester, associate professor of history at the University of Central Florida, director of the RICHES Digital Archiving project, and editor of the Florida Historical Quarterly. Connie, in your role as Director of RICHES, you spend a lot of time collecting oral histories from members of the community. I heard that you recently participated in a very unusual one.

**Connie Lester**

Yes, I did. The oral history was conducted at the Hannibal Square Heritage Center by Miss Fairland Livingston, a masterful oral historian whose work in Central Florida has earned multiple awards and recognitions from Rollins College and the Orange County Regional History Center. She and Kim Mold, a Winter Park historian, had invited the RICHES team to record the oral history of Deborah Kirby and make it public. Miss Kirby is a retired nurse whose Hannibal Square roots go back several generations. Born and reared in Hannibal Square, Ms. Kirby is the great granddaughter of Washington Straughter and his wife Edith. Mr. Straughter was quite prominent in the Hannibal Square neighborhood of Winter Park, as a farmer, and grove owner, and as a dealer in real estate.

**Ben Brotemarkle**

Were the Straughters the focus of oral history?

**Connie Lester**

No, the focus was on Blanche Brookins, the Straughter's daughter, and Miss Kirby's grandmother. Miss Brookins, who was married to Gilbert Brookins, a property manager for a northern resident of Winter Park, became the center of widespread newspaper attention and earned a place in national legal history in the late 1920s when she challenged Jim Crow segregation. At the time of the precipitating incident, in July 1926, Miss Brookins was the mother of a 2-year-old daughter named Eleanor, and she was almost six months pregnant with her second child. Mother and daughter were returning to Orange County from an extended stay in New York with Miss Brooklyn's sister. Blanche Brookins purchased a first-class ticket for a Pullman sleeping car in New York for her trip south. Mother and daughter boarded the train and travelled without incident until they reached Jacksonville. The pair were ordered to leave first class and move to the Jim Crow, or colored car. Miss Brookins refused to do so. Jacksonville railroad officials

telegraphed ahead to Palatka to request that Miss Brookins be removed from the train and arrested. Two policemen were waiting for the train. They arrested her and took Ms. Brookins and her daughter to jail. Miss Kirby noted that her grandmother and mother were not placed in a cell but were kept at the jail until the next morning when they appeared before Putnam County Judge J.C. Calhoun, who fined her \$500.00, plus court costs. Her father and brother arrived at the courthouse before the hearing and were prepared to pay the fine and costs in cash. According to Miss Kirby, a young policeman expressed his amazement that a black family could pay such a large fine, and that they would have the cash to do so when the banks had not yet opened. His older colleague pointed to the clothing of Miss Brookins and her daughter and earrings the mother wore and stated that he believed they were capable of paying the fine and more. Miss Kirby inherited the earrings from her grandmother, and she wore them to the interview. The story of the arrest and fine was reported in the February 1927 issue of the "Crisis," the monthly magazine of the NAACP. Ms. Brookins' experience was one that was all too familiar to middle- and upper-class black travelers. The Jim Crow segregation laws required black passengers to travel at the rear of urban public transportation, such as street cars, and in a specially designated Jim Crow cars on trains. Uncomfortable and dirty, the cars were also used as smoking cars for men of all races, a space where they could drink, smoke, and play card games. Not a suitable place for women. As historian Robert Cassanella's research shows, blacks protested the substandard accommodations, claiming the right to purchase first class tickets and ride in first class cars. In making these demands, they asserted public recognition of their own respectability, but white supremacy judged on the basis of skin color and offered no recognition of class, education, or respectability if the skin was black.

### **Ben Brotemarkle**

That's an amazing story. Standing up for her rights in the Jim Crow South must have been an inspiration for her family and her community, but I don't think I've ever heard that story.

### **Connie Lester**

In 1981, Gerald H Schofner cited the Palatka incident in a Florida Historical Quarterly article using a newspaper account that appeared in the New York Age. But what he didn't know, or didn't use in the article, was that the story did not end with the payment of the fine and the return to Hannibal Square. Ms. Brookins' New York sister filed a complaint with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. After investigating the incident, the NAACP supported the filing of a lawsuit, Brookins versus Atlantic Coast Line Railroad, in U.S. District Court for the Southern District of New York. A suit was also filed against the Pullman Company, the manufacturer of the rail car in which Ms. Brookins had been riding. The plaintiff demanded damages of \$25,000. She was represented by Arthur Garfield Hayes of the New York firm of Hayes, St. John's, and Buckley. Clarence Darrow, who in 1925 defended John Scopes in the famous Scopes trial at Dayton, Tennessee, was co-counsel. In January 1929, Crisis magazine reported that Ms. Brookins was awarded \$2750 by the court in her successful suit. Attorney Hayes noted "passengers in interstate traffic are not subject to Jim Crow regulation of Southern states without equal accommodation, being furnished by the railroad." Perhaps influenced by the example of her grandmother, Ms. Kirby, stood up for her rights as well. A member of the first integrated class at Winter Park High School, she was also a part of the first integrated class at Florida State University, where she joined other students in demanding the creation of a black student union, a goal that had been achieved by the time she graduated from FSU. This important oral history documents the multi-generational strength of a black family as they challenge the limitations imposed by Jim Crow.

**Ben Brotemarkle**

A fascinating story. Thanks, Connie.

**Connie Lester**

You're welcome.

**Ben Brotemarkle**

Connie Lester is associate professor of history at the University of Central Florida, director of the RICHES Digital Archiving project, and editor of the Florida Historical Quarterly.

**(Music Break)****Ben Brotemarkle**

This is Florida Frontiers. Jacksonville's Stanton School is one of Florida's most endangered historic buildings. Holly Baker has more.

**Holly Baker**

The Florida Trust for Historic Preservation recently announced 2021's 11 to Save List of the Most Threatened Historic Properties and resources across Florida. Old Stanton High School in Duval County is featured on the 2021 list. Stanton Institute, known later as Stanton High School, opened in 1868 as the first and only public secondary school for African Americans in Reconstruction Florida. Ennis Davis is an urban planning consultant and a trustee for the Florida Trust for Historic Preservation. He told me more about Old Stanton High School.

**Ennis Davis**

It was named in honor of General Edwin McMasters Stanton, who was an outspoken abolitionist, and the Secretary of War for President Lincoln during the Civil War. And so, one interesting story about its history is in 1877, President Ulysses Grant visited the school during a tour of Florida. But during this visit he runs into a six-year-old student named James Weldon Johnson who raises his hand from the crowd and actually gets President Grant to shake his hand. So, this young kid, James Weldon Johnson, would go on to become the school's principal in 1894, and he was the principal who would expand the school into a high school for African Americans in the city, and it's actually the first black high school in the city of Jacksonville.

**Holly Baker**

While at Stanton, James Weldon Johnson studied law and became the first African American admitted to the Florida Bar since reconstruction. In 1895, he started a black newspaper called the Daily American. In 1900, he wrote a poem called "Lift Every Voice and Sing," the poem, written to commemorate what would have been President Abraham Lincoln's 91st birthday, would become one of the most popular songs of all time.

**Ennis Davis**



This same song, his brother, John Rosamund Johnson, would compose and put to music, and this song would go on to become the black national anthem across the United States. And it maybe you know, as popular as it's ever been in its 120-year-old history. James Weldon Johnson himself would go on to be a famous songwriter, author, poet, the diplomat, and a Civil rights leader as well during the Harlem Renaissance.

### **Holly Baker**

While James Weldon Johnson is perhaps the most famous person associated with the school, other former students at Old Stanton High School went on to become civil rights activists, philanthropists, educators, musicians, athletes, and authors of books and songs.

### **Ennis Davis**

One cool thing about this school is being one of the oldest schools for black residents in the state of Florida, it's got a long list of famous alumni, people that are associated with the school. This was the location where A. Philip Randolph, who was the civil rights leader who helped organize the 1963 March on Washington, had events at this particular school. Eartha White, who was a civil rights leader and possibly the first black woman millionaire in the state of Florida, also was a graduate of the school, as well as Harry T Moore, who was a civil rights leader who was assassinated in Mims, FL. He was also a student at Stanton at one point in time. And then there's Charlie Hall Singleton, who was a well-known composer, who wrote the lyrics to Strangers in the Night for Frank Sinatra, Spanish eyes, which Elvis Presley performed and sold over 3,000,000 copies, and he wrote a number of songs over a 1000 by the end of his career for a number of famous musicians such as Nat King Cole, Ella Fitzgerald, B.B. King, Johnny Mathis, and Wayne Newton.

### **Holly Baker**

In 1953, the school located on the corner of Broad and Ashley Streets, became known as the Old Stanton High School when the new Stanton High School opened up on West 13th St. Ennis Davis.

### **Ennis Davis**

Stanton would transition during the 1950s when a newer school was constructed to replace it. This particular building, and at that point in time for several years it served as vocational school. It's been a location for a small Head Start program in the past, but for the past several years it's been vacant, and the test of time has caused a portion of the building's roof to fall in on itself. There was a roof collapse about a year ago and so there is a rush against time to make sure we can get this roof replaced before it damages the structural integrity of this historic property, which was, you know, designated to the National Register in 1983. So Historic Stanton Incorporated, which is the nonprofit working to raise funds to restore the building is working with the City of Jacksonville to replace that roof and continue the plan to restore the structure and to a mix of uses, those mix of uses include a history museum, as well as restaurant and retail space, and position in a portion of building to serve as a community center, event space, and office space. So, it's really believed that continued exposure, like what we're doing today, about the rich history of this building and its potential side and future, is a way to assist and bring more awareness to help in the restoration efforts that is currently ongoing.

### **Holly Baker**

To learn more about the Florida Trust for Historic Preservation and the 11 to Save list, go to [floridatrust.org](http://floridatrust.org). For Florida Frontiers, I'm Holly Baker, public history coordinator for the Florida Historical Society and archivist at the Library of Florida History in Cocoa.

**Ben Brotemarkle**

You've been listening to Florida Frontiers, the weekly radio magazine of the Florida Historical Society. Please join us right here again next week. Until then, you can find us anytime online at [myfloridahistory.org](http://myfloridahistory.org) and on Facebook. Production assistance for Florida Frontiers comes from Holly Baker and Connie Lester. The program is edited by Jon White. Have a great week. I'm Ben Brotemarkle.

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